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Land of the Crested Lion

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The Shwe Dagon Pagoda, Rangoon

Land of the Crested Lion

A Journey Through Modern Burma

By
ETHEL MANNIN

With 23 Photographs

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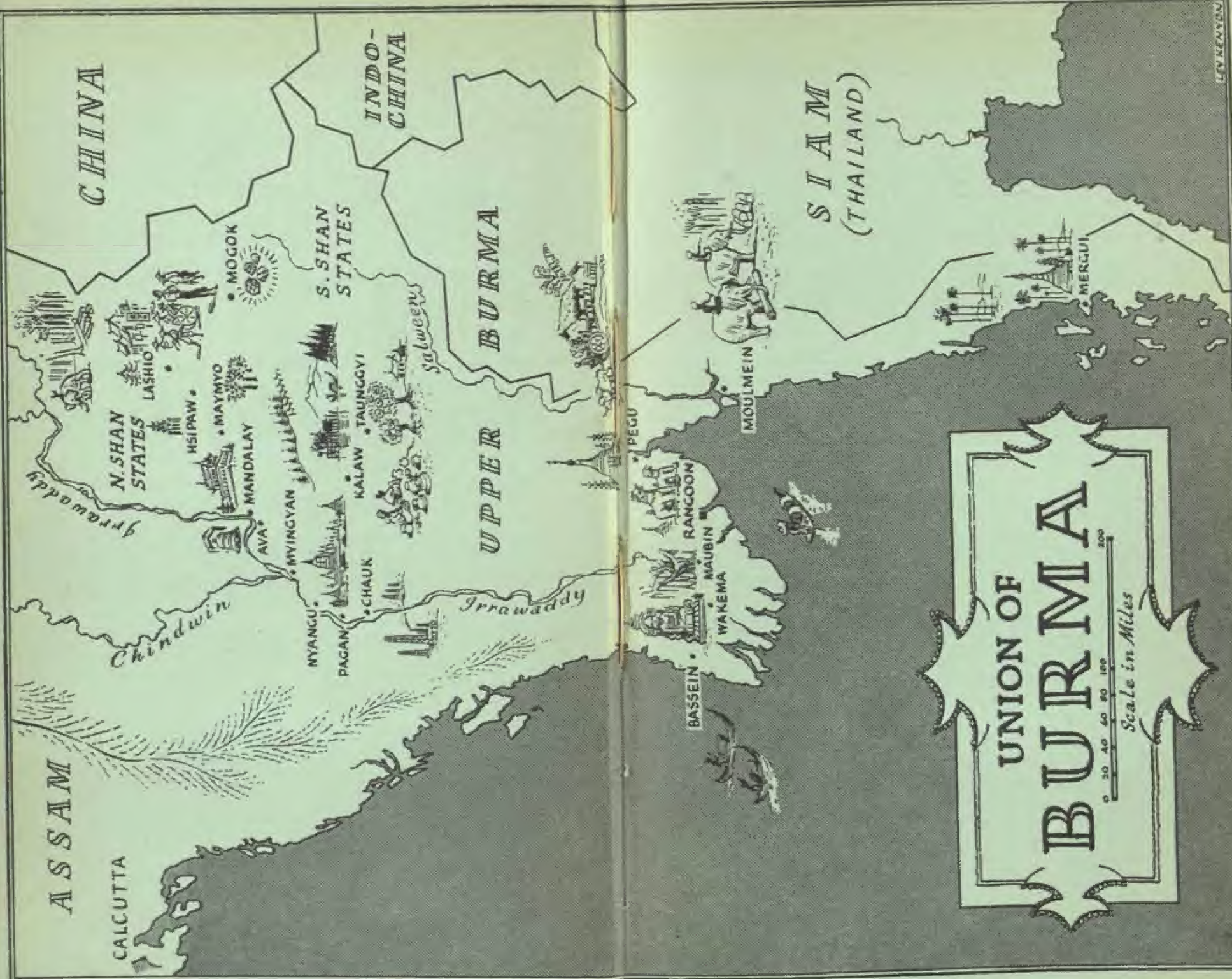
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

For assistance with this book I am indebted to a number of people, but outstandingly to Mr. David Maurice, Editor of the *Light of the Dhamma*, Rangoon, Mr. C. Maxwell-Lefroy of the Burmah Oil Company, and the company's very able Publicity Officer, U San Win, all of whom have dealt with innumerable questions with endless patience. In addition to these three whom I continually plagued, I have also received valuable assistance from Mr. Leigh Elsum of the Lode Tin Mines, Mergui, Mr. Noël Whiting of Kalaw, the Reverend Fr. Connealy of St. Columban's Catholic Mission, Bhamo, Mr. Francis Story, founder of the Burma Buddhist World Mission, Rangoon, U Maung Maung of the *Guardian*, Rangoon, Mrs. E. Barraclough of the British Embassy, Rangoon, Siri Sithu U Ba Maung, K.S.M., T.D.M., of the Burmese National Bank, Mandalay, to whom I am also indebted for hospitality and for arranging my programme in Mandalay, and my old friend Mr. Gilbert Turner both for assistance with proofs and the securing of old and out-of-print books about Burma for my purpose.

But without all that was done for me by Thado Maha Thray Sithu U Chan Htoon, then Attorney-General to the Union of Burma, now an associate judge of the Supreme Court, a great deal of the material for the book could not have been collected, for in addition to being my host in Rangoon he made possible for me much that would otherwise have been impossible at that time in travelling the country.

Nor could I have achieved my objectives without the co-operation of the Union Buddha Sasana Council, and the hospitality of both Burmese and British people throughout

the Union. Some of my hosts are named in the book; to the unnamed ones I am not less grateful.

Finally I want to record my gratitude to the first Burman I ever met, U Maung Maung Ji, press-attaché of the Burmese Embassy, London, who was so immediately kind and helpful that I was predisposed to like Burmans before I ever set foot in their incredibly beautiful country and was received with such generosity into their homes.

In the matter of transliterations I have used those most commonly accepted, with the exception of *pongyi*, which is commonly rendered *phongyi*; here I have chosen the phonetic as the other is misleading as regards pronunciation. 'ky', as in *kyaung*, or Kyaume, is pronounced like the English 'ch'. Thus the difficult place-name, Myitkyina, is pronounced, 'Michina'. I have used the Sanskrit terms *Nirvana* and *Karma*, instead of the Pali, *Nibbana* and *Kamma*, as more familiar to the West, though Burma as a Theravada Buddhist country uses the Pali scriptural texts.

(I)

FAR EAST FLIGHT

IN AMSTERDAM the cold was quite unbelievable. It sprang at the face with a breath of sheer ice the moment the 'plane door was opened. It was a shock to the system. And then no less of a shock the intense heat of the airport buildings—this, too, seemed unbelievable. But Amsterdam possesses what is perhaps the most elegant, the most modernly beautiful, the most efficiently appointed airport in the world. The traveller in transit is given an excellent meal, with a glass of wine, so that by the time he boards the huge 'plane in which he is really to make the journey he feels warmed and heartened.

At Zurich there was the same fierce cold, and again the shock of transition from intense cold to great heat. This is another of Europe's handsome streamlined airports, and here we sat at a long bar, having been provided with drink vouchers for that pleasant purpose, and here an amiable Indonesian with whom I fell into conversation inquired of me, with an ironic smile, if in the light of the recent political disturbances the French could be considered 'fit for self-government' . . .

After Zurich comes the short night hop—short because the clocks are now three hours ahead of European time—with the seats lowered and the lights dimmed, to the Lebanon. Ah, the Lebanon! At Beirut in the early morning the traveller steps out into the softest, warmest air imaginable, with such a balminess to it as though all the cedars-of-Lebanon of all the ages had breathed into it. But it is more than the cedars; there is a sudden 'smell of the East, exciting as the sudden recognition of mimosa trees in flower outside the shabby airport buildings with their barbed wire and their security officials behind long counters. With Beirut the smart European airports are left behind. Beirut airport is a huge shed with a

corrugated-iron roof and wire fencing and a café with flags of all nations failing to brighten the dingy-looking tables.

At this airport you are not admissible if you possess even an expired Israeli visa. So bitter a gesture is comprehensible, yet it cannot help the nigh on a million Palestine Arabs dispossessed of their lands and homes and living out their lives in bitterness and despair in camps, caves, and the wilderness. There were those who declared with passion that 'the very stones of Islam would rise' before such a tragedy should come to pass; but it did come to pass, and the stones of Islam did not rise, nor even all Islam—not even the Arab League . . . so that there is a double bitterness in the gesture.

But outside in the sun men lounge idly up against walls, incurious, indifferent, suspended in time, and the sea is brilliant in the curve of the land. There are palms and eucalyptus trees and bright-coloured summer flowers—stocks, marigolds, petunias—and bamboo fencing, and behind the town the hills rise, range upon range, misty with morning and impending heat, the farthest snow-capped. Well, it is something at least to have smelled the air laden with the scent of the now dwindling cedars-of-Lebanon.

At Baghdad there is no such soft enchantment; there is not the same softness on the air, but the East draws closer, for now there are men in *jellabaks*, and women so closely veiled in black *haiks* as to resemble nothing so much as sacks of coal with feet.

The approach to Baghdad from the air is over innumerable palm groves, but from the airport nothing is to be seen. We sit at tables on the burnt-up grass of the open-air restaurant. There are dispirited-looking dishes of nuts and dates, and we are offered tea or coffee or soft drinks. Coco-Cola is one of the choices. Vultures perch on the roof of a building opposite, black gargoyles against a brilliant sky. One of the formalities at Baghdad is the command in the usual 'security' form to state one's religion.

It seems nothing but brown desert all the way from Beirut to Baghdad, with Cyprus from twenty thousand feet appearing as no more than a bare brown rock, and we fly on over the same burnt-up landscape, but quilted now with brown hills. There is no colour but brown everywhere, and even the sea,

as we head out over the mouths of the Euphrates and the Tigris, and fly down the Persian Gulf to Karachi, is colourless.

It is a seven-hour flight to Karachi and we arrive in the evening. The various air lines have their rest-houses here, where passengers in transit may rest, sleep, take showers, and generally refresh themselves. The rest-houses are the usual pattern of bungalows built round compounds full of flowers, with communal lounges and dining-rooms. And there are the usual trundling windmill fans, the house lizards on walls and ceilings, and that emanation of the East shadowed forth strongly now in the warm brief dusk as though it had been developing all day from that first subtle evasive half-promise of Beirut in the morning.

For the six hours that we must spend here each passenger is given three tickets for drinks; when we return to the 'plane at three in the morning, changed from our warm European clothes into tropical ones, the men in whites, the women in summer dresses, we are all feeling refreshed, one way or another. The night on board is short, for the clock is put forward another two hours, and at seven the stewards waken us with orange juice, to be followed by tea or coffee, egg and bacon, fruit, or what you will. I am fascinated by a woman near me who eats a roll and butter with a knife and fork. I am fascinated by the hearty appetites all round me, following boiled eggs with cold ham and gherkins and cheese. Everyone looks very big and strong; perhaps that is why.

The breakfast trays are removed; we freshen ourselves up and take to looking out of the window again. We are flying straight into a brand new day which in Europe has not yet begun. It is an exciting thought. We are flying straight into the dawn. Some seventeen thousand feet below lies the great red plain of India, with forests and jungles, and pools where the tiger comes to take his sun-up drink before lying up for the heat of the day. We are over the very middle of India; over Nagpur, perhaps, Nagpur of the orange groves, surrounded by the jungles of what used to be called the Central Provinces. The Eastern Ghats, looking from this height bare and brown, seem the merest hills; they appear and are gone, and we head out across the Bay of Bengal.

The passengers sleep and read. The stewards organize a

little diversion, inviting the passengers to guess their ages and win a prize. I guess that the balding steward is not as old as he looks and that the pretty stewardess is probably older than she looks. I guess all three ages correctly and am presented with a Delft china box. But the mild excitement of the guessing game retreats before the excitement of the tremendous dawn-over-Burma into which we are flying.

It seemed to fill the whole world with reflected fire. Then the sun moved up with astonishing rapidity vertically into position and the sky's flame faded into a translucent blue which rapidly deepened. In the East the sun does not lie about among pillows of rose and gold clouds and get up gradually in a long slow curve. It rises straight up out of a bed of fire as theatrically as any stage sun or moon. It was already bright shining day when our great grey 'island in the sky' moved in over the green relief map of Burma.

The first sight of a new country is always exciting, whether viewed from the sea or the air. It is not true that you see nothing when you fly. You see a great deal. You see the shape of the country you are approaching, and its contours. The first sight of Burma flying in across the Bay of Bengal is of forests, and flat land broken up everywhere by water—the mouths of the Irrawaddy, the Delta. It is all so green after the burnt brown plain of India.

The heart quickens, fearfully; a kind of fearful eagerness. This is where you were for months planning to be. This is the land you were for months reading about and thinking about. This is it. The 'plane is already descending. Strangers are gathered to meet you. Kindly, welcoming strangers, but still—strangers. 'It need never have happened.' That is not quite true. In the pattern of your particular *karma* it was bound to happen.

There is a bump. We are down. The earth under the racing wheels is Burma.

There was the immediate shock of heat on stepping from the 'plane. One had forgotten that it could be like that. There was a small reception committee gathered at the foot of the 'plane steps. My host, Thado Maha Thray Sithu U Chan Htoon, Attorney General to the Union of Burma, had done me

the honour of coming to meet me; with him was U Po Sein of the Union Buddha Sasana Council, a government organization, whose guest I was; also the Australian David Maurice, editor of *The Light of the Dhamma*, published by the Council, and the English Francis Story, founder of the Burma Buddhist World Mission. A Burmese youth presented a bouquet of heat-wilted asters. "Don't feel you are coming to strangers," Francis Story had written encouragingly to London. I had corresponded with both him and David Maurice for some six months; nevertheless when the immigration formalities were over and I drove away with David Maurice and the Attorney General it was a journey into a new world, all potential strangeness, strange potentialities.

There was a confused impression of a hot and dusty landscape, the momentary recognition of the golden pagoda on a hill, then a long drive up through a barbed wire fencing, past an armed guard who saluted as we passed, to a palatial white house, Themis Court, once the residence of the Lord Chief Justice, during the British regime, now that of the Attorney General of independent Burma.

In the cool interior my hostess—whom strictly it is not correct to call Mrs. Chan Htoon, as Burmese women do not take their husband's name—descended the broad polished staircase to greet me. She was, as always in the house, in accordance with custom, barefooted, and wore the characteristic dress of the Burmese woman, that is to say *longyi* and *eingyi*. The *longyi* is simply a long skirt consisting of two yards of material, silk or cotton, the ends stitched together, wrapped tightly round the hips and tucked in at the waist. The same garment is worn by the men, but is fixed differently; on special occasions they wear a more elaborate form of it, called the *pasoe*, very voluminous in front and invariably made of silk. The *eingyi* is a short jacket, with long or short sleeves—always long for formal occasions, such as weddings—and usually of transparent white nylon. This jacket—more like a blouse than a jacket—is fastened at the neck and down one side with detachable ornate buttons, which may be of real pearls or precious stones. Under it is worn a white bodice of lace and cotton, stiffened to support the bust. This undergarment is of course completely revealed, and when women

first began to wear transparent jackets the monks were incensed, preached against it and led a boycott campaign against the Indian shops which sold the material. In at least one instance a woman was beaten by incensed monks,¹ but their puritanism could not prevail against feminine determination in the matter of fashion, and today the transparent nylon *eingyi* is general with women of all classes, in town and village alike.

But none of all this I knew that first day, when my tall and gracious hostess conducted me up the handsome staircase; indeed I did not know even enough to take off my shoes before we ascended the stairs. I was shown into a large high-ceilinged room with a bare polished floor and two deep windows covered with wire mesh. I was to share this room with Esmé, the fourteen-year-old eldest daughter of U Chan Htoon; mutual affection made it eventually 'our' room—which in retrospect it still is. One window looked into a tall mango tree, the other across a tangle of wild plantain, bamboo and frangipane, to the huge shining golden cone of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda raised above the city on its wooded hill and which I had glimpsed confusedly from the car window. Now there was time to stand and stare—and the feeling that it would be impossible to stare enough. Its gold was burnished by the mid-day sun to a richness and brilliance that dazzled the eye. For it is pure leaf-gold, this pagoda, for the whole of its three-hundred-odd feet, from its broad bell-shaped base to the tapering tip of its *hti*—a jewel-encrusted 'umbrella' fringed by hundreds of gold and silver bells. It was almost in the nature of a shock to realize that this dream-like beauty was, as the crow flies—and the mango tree swarmed with crows—only a few minutes distant.

I read a story once—or perhaps I wrote it myself—about a woman who fell in love with a roundabouts. When I finally turned away from that window I knew that I was in love with a pagoda.

¹ Reported by Major Leroy Christian in his chapter on Religion in Burma in his book, *Burma and the Japanese Invader* (Thacker & Co., Bombay), 1945.

(II)

PAGODA PIECE: THE SHWE DAGON

IT is usual when reporting on a foreign country to deal first with the capital. I have observed this in the best travel books, and have also gone to work in this way myself. The Eastern traveller, visiting London or Paris, would not report first on Westminster Abbey or Notre Dame; he would first study and report upon the cities enshrining these treasures. But then Rangoon, the modern, political, capital of Burma does not enshrine the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, which though it dominates the city is not strictly speaking in it but on its outskirts; it may therefore be considered as a separate entity. Rangoon enshrines the Sule Pagoda as positively as London's Piccadilly Circus enshrines the Eros fountain, and the Sule Pagoda is beautiful and of interest, and it, too, is golden, but it is not dramatic like the great Shwe Dagon.

It was not of the Sule Pagoda but of the dramatic, the incomparable Shwe Dagon that Ralph Fitch, that considerable traveller, declared in the sixteenth century, that it was 'the fairest place, as I suppose, that doe bee in all the worlde'. Fitch died a quarter of a century before the Taj Mahal, that 'dream in white marble', was begun; he knew only the dream in pure gold emblazoned against the sky as he sailed up the Rangoon River. Having seen the Taj Mahal, and also the turquoise enamelled domes of the Mosque of Shakh-Zinda, the crowning glory of Tamerlaine's Samarkand, I would still place the Shwe Dagon Pagoda first, without having to think about it.

I do not know why the Shwe Dagon is so incredibly moving. Perhaps it is because of the sheer purity of its line against the flawless sky. It is dramatic and beautiful from whatever angle

it is approached. There are four covered staircases up to it, North, South, East and West. The main entrance is the South, and here at the foot of the steps stand huge guardian beasts, *Chinthes*, which in the Burmese-English dictionary is translated as lions, though they are perhaps more like dragons or griffins. They are crested creatures, with a kind of topknot, and are characteristic of the pagodas everywhere. Those which guard the main entrance of the Shwe Dagon are enormous. They are white, picked out with red, blue and gold paint, and have a fabulous fairytale quality.

At either side of these South steps as you mount—bare-footed—there are small open-fronted shops or stalls, selling Buddha images of all kinds, small gilt shrines for the home, tinselled pictures of the Buddha and his chief disciple, strings of large rosary beads, tinselled marionette dolls, tiny paper parasols for placing on shrines, wood-carvings of the crested lions, ivory carvings of all kinds, real tortoiseshell combs, small oblong drums—essential to Burmese music—and near the top of the stairs flower stalls, where also joss-sticks and candles are sold. The flower stalls are of a sweetness unknown to any European flower stalls, for they are stacked with jasmine, tuber-roses and many other heavily scented flowers native to the East, as well as roses and carnations, and lesser, scentless, flowers such as asters and marigolds. The flowers, singly and in bunches, are tied to thin sticks, so that they may be easily placed in the vases in front of the Buddha images. They will not live, for there is no water in the vases, but they are not intended to, since they are not placed there as a decoration for the shrine, as flowers are arranged on a Christian altar, but solely as an offering; this being so their perfume should not be inhaled by those who offer them, and they should be carried upright, not in any careless, casual fashion.

At the back of some of the stalls, in a kind of half-dark hinterland, there are small shacks at which meals are cooked and tea is made, and here are benches where after dark, when there is no more buying or selling, people sleep. A whole world of life goes on in that half-concealed hinterland beside the pagoda steps.

The North entrance does not connect with a street and is therefore not much used. The steps lead down to jungly land

which before it reaches the road rises again to the hill known as Arzarneegon, 'Martyrs' Hill', so named because on it are the graves of General Aung San and seven of his cabinet who were assassinated at the instigation of U Saw, in an attempted political coup in 1947. Once a year, on Martyrs' Day, July 19th, there is a good deal of coming and going on these North steps, but for the rest of the year they are more or less deserted. The hill itself attracts visitors all the year round, but it is inaccessible from the road, and most people visiting the pagoda prefer the more popular entrances.

The approach to the East steps is through a long bazaar where all manner of things are sold—slippers, clothing, combs, jewellery, religious books and pictures, all the conglomeration that makes up a bazaar, and this bazaar continues on up the steps which seem as a result merely like the continuation of the busy narrow street. Once on these steps with David Maurice we met with a friend of his, an old hermit in from the country. He wore the dark clothes and carried the staff of his calling. After he and David had warmly greeted each other we all three continued on up the steps. David explained that it would not be correct to say that the old man lived by the begging bowl, for he did not in fact beg, but that if anyone liked to make him a present he would accept not as a favour but as conferring one, for the chief benefit would accrue to the giver, who would acquire merit thereby. Without any desire to acquire merit, however, I nevertheless thought it would be nice to give the old man a few rupees, and asked David to convey this to him. This was done and the offer accepted, with the request that it be done in the proper place, up on the platform of the pagoda—the marble paved terrace, that is to say, which encompasses its base.

When we reached the platform we walked round a little, past various carved wooden shrines, beautiful with red lacquer, housing Buddha images of marble or gold or brass or alabaster, until we came to a spot where the hermit said it would be right to give and to accept alms. Having given we abased ourselves at the feet of the venerable man, who gave us his blessing. Then seeing what was going on, and that they had a holy man in their midst, other people came and gave gifts of money, so that it was altogether a good day for the hermit when

he had encountered his old friend on the steps, and a good day for David and for me and for the others who rallied round. The old man explained to us what a good thing it was for us all, and how it was part of his *karma* that he should have been on those particular steps at that particular moment, and we parted in that aura of goodwill which is always a good thing whenever and wherever it is met with.

The West steps are flanked by golden pillars, and the roof is gilded and painted. There are fewer shops and stalls here and in places none at all, so that there are views out over the city, and the walk half way up the pagoda hill is visible. It is beautiful to do this walk at sundown, when the tall palms which spring up here and there at either side of the path lean against the crimson sky and the pagoda takes on an incredible sunset splendour of golden fire. Then as the brief twilight fades the lights come out on the pagoda and the palms blacken against the violet sky. But then, too, by moonlight this walk is most magical; then the palms and the wild plantains of the shrubberies at each side of the path, and the little chalet-like wooden houses at various points, are touched with mystery, and the soft silver light seems to drip from the trees and the ornately carved gables of the houses like water. Inside the little houses people squat on floors eating rice, or telling their beads before a Buddha shrine, by the light of a single candle. There is a tremendous commotion of cicadas.

Between the palms and the neem trees at one side of the path there are sudden glimpses of the lights of the city down below. Above, at the other side of the path, poised between the plumes of the strangely leaning palms, there are glimpses of the illuminated pagoda on its hilltop, its gold as burnished by moonlight as by sunlight, and when the moon is young it is like a jewel that has somehow strayed from the spire of the pagoda. There is a desolate, eerie patch before the path crosses the East steps; only weeds and thorns grow here, and the ground suddenly makes the bare feet aware of flints.

I had here the strange experience of feeling suddenly cold and afraid, with an unaccountable feeling of horror. I exclaimed to my companion that it was as though 'something awful' had happened here at one time. My companion, however, felt nothing except that the going here was stonier.

Crossing the steps and continuing to follow the path at the other side the magic reasserted itself and I had again the feeling of walking in a fairyland of beauty and strangeness remote from everyday reality. It is a curiously private world, too; on neither of the occasions when I invaded it did I see anyone else walking there for the sake of it, and the people living there stared with the air of people not used to being intruded upon, though only the prowling pariah dogs seemed to resent it. It was not until I got back to London that I learned that during the second war of annexation, in 1852, under Lord Dalhousie, the pagoda had been fortified and there had been bitter fighting on the East steps, where the Burmese had been taken by surprise, and many soldiers, both British and Burmese had died there.

At the top of the hill, where the pagoda stands surrounded at its base by lesser pagodas, and by shrines innumerable, all encircled by the flat marble-paved terrace, another new world of strangeness and beauty is revealed. The small golden pagodas round the base of the big one all have their little crowns of bells which tinkle most sweetly in the wind. At the base of the pagoda, too, there are carved wooden shrines, red lacquered, and with charming gabled roofs in tiers, terminating in fine spires, and they, also, have their little bells. There are shrines, too, large and small, across the terrace from the base of the pagoda, all of them housing Buddha images—reclining Buddhas, standing Buddhas, Buddhas in the conventional lotus position. At the top of each flight of steps there are big shrines, with huge Buddha images, and long altars where flowers are laid and candles and joss-sticks lit. In these major shrines men, women and children are always to be found, kneeling on bamboo mats contemplating the Buddha image, bowing down in the act of worship till their foreheads touch the ground, repeating such formulas from the scriptures, such precepts of their faith, as are suited to the occasion, but always that which reminds them that life is suffering, impermanence, change, from which, as the Lord Buddha taught, only the overcoming of craving can release them.

When someone makes a donation to the pagoda fund the big bell is struck, and its reverberations spread far out over the terrace. In his most beautiful book about Burma, *The*

Soul of a People,¹ the late Fielding Hall, who was an official in Burma during the British Raj, tells how the British took this bell from the pagoda and sought to bring it to England as a war trophy (it was after the first war of annexation), but as it was being put on board ship it slipped and fell into the river, from which all the efforts of the British engineers failed to raise it. Then the Burmese asked if they might try to recover the bell, their sacred bell, and if they were able to might they be allowed to restore it to the pagoda. 'And they were told, with a laugh, perhaps, that they might; and so they raised it up again, the river giving back to them what it had refused to us, and they took it and hung it where it used to be. There it is now, and you may hear it when you go, giving out a long, deep note, the beat of the pagoda's heart.' The Burmese have not forgotten this story of the bell; I was told it more than once, in Rangoon and in Mandalay, and more than once I read it.

In addition to the lesser pagodas, and the shrines, at the base of the pagoda itself there are little gilded wrought-iron trees, very decorative and charming, with the names of their donors set forth in plaques at their feet. There is also strip-lighting, now, in the various shrines, and on the pagoda itself, and the names of the donors are everywhere prominent. It is a pity, like the mangy pariah dogs who inhabit the pagodas everywhere, but magnificence is not minimized by minor blemishes.

There are always many people up on the pagoda terrace, from early morning till late at night, making it at all hours as lively as a street, with children racing about, people strolling and sitting. It is not considered irreverent when sitting in front of a Buddha image to smoke a cheroot. I have seen both men and women doing it in pagodas everywhere, and chatting as they sit. The Buddha is not considered divine. He was a great teacher, the Enlightened One, the Blessed One. The people come to pay his memory homage, and by repeating his precepts remind themselves of the truths he revealed to the world and which they accept as a way of life. It is a conception of worship and of prayer quite different from the Christian and the Moslem conception. It is a conception of religion in which man must look to himself for salvation, not to any divine power.

¹ MacMillan & Co. (London), 1899.

So the people at the Shwe Dagon, and at the pagodas everywhere, behave according to their current moods and needs; they do not whisper or tiptoe about. They talk and laugh, or they repeat the precepts, or they merely sit silently gazing, each paying homage in his own way, worshipping in his own way.

There are many trees up on the platform of the pagoda, and a number of odd corners behind the shrines where there are little courtyards and terraces looking out over the city to the lakes. There are tall palms here, and shady neem trees, and there is a big old sacred tree to whose base the people piously apply gold-leaf. During the water-festival they bring a great deal of water to this tree—for it was under such a tree that Prince Gautama, who became the Lord Buddha, received his enlightenment. It is very pleasant to sit in the shade of the trees in what might be described as the back streets of the pagoda—taking the broad marbled walk round the base to be the main street—and the people like to sit there, on wooden benches, or perched on the parapet, talking, smoking, eating, admiring the view, or merely watching the coming and going of their fellow-men.

People make the pilgrimage to the Shwe Dagon from all parts of the country; Shans from the Shan States, Kachins from the northern hills, Mons from the villages of the deep south. And there are always *pongyis* (monks—the word means 'great glory') walking about in their orange-coloured robes, and shaven-headed nuns in their pale pink robes; and there are a few beggars, but they are not beggars in the ordinarily accepted sense but beggars as it were for the kingdom of heaven's sake, and mostly they are brown-clad hermit women.

The pagoda enshrines eight hairs of the Buddha's head brought from India more than 2500 years ago by two Burmese merchants. There was then on this southernmost spur of the range of hills known as the Pegu Yoma only the Mon—or Mun—village of Dagon, which eventually became Yangon, from which comes the modern name Rangoon. The shrine now known as the Shwe Dagon was the creation of Shinbyushin, King of Ava, in 1774. He raised it to its present height and gilded it with his own weight in gold. But centuries before then, during the years of the Mon Kingdom of Pegu, Shinsawbu, Queen Regnant of Hanthawaddy, had gilded it with her own weight

in gold. King Singu, the son of the Emperor Shinbyushin, regilded the pagoda in 1778 and had a sixteen-ton bronze bell cast, which stands now at the north-west corner of the platform. This is the bell which fell into the river during the Anglo-Burmese war of 1824, and was brought up by the Burmese in 1826 and restored to its place. The great canopy or umbrella—the *hti*—was the gift of King Mindon, who founded Mandalay. It cost half a million rupees and is hung with some fifteen hundred bells, one hundred of which are gold, the rest silver. This wonderful gift was sent by the king down the Irrawaddy in 1852, when Lower Burma was already in the hands of the British. The king had begged that one of his own representatives be allowed to officiate at the hoisting of the *hti*, but the British considered that this would be in the nature of a political gesture, and taken as such by the people, and the request was refused. Nevertheless a vast crowd attended the event and celebrated it with great festivities.

The hoisting of a new *hti* for even the smallest of pagodas is always an occasion for festivity, for *pwé*, as it is called, when open-air performances of dancing and singing go on literally from dusk till dawn. People come in from far and wide for *pwé*, and innumerable eating booths are set up, and stalls for the sale of fruit-juice drinks, sweets, fruit, cakes, and all manner of things. The Burmese love festivals, and it unifies their national life that these festivals are invariably in connection with their religion. There is more to say about *pwé*, so important in Burmese life, but the place is not here, where we are considering the fairest place that doe bee in all the worlde.

Aldous Huxley, who found the Taj Mahal 'disappointing', reacted to the Shwe Dagon as to a 'sacred Fun Fair, a Luna Park dedicated to the greater glory of Gautama—but more fantastic, more wildly amusing than any Bank Holiday invention'.¹ That is sad for Mr. Huxley, that his eyes and his spirit were denied the vision of beauty, that he missed 'the perfume of the thousand thousand prayers that have been prayed there, of the thousand thousand holy thoughts that have been thought there'. I have seen this pagoda athwart the mango tree at sunrise, and have leaned upon its parapet at sundown; I have seen it burnished to golden fire in the mid-day

¹ In *Jesting Pilate*.

sun, and bewitched into something in a dream by moonlight. I have heard the tauk-té lizard calling its name somewhere out of sight as I wandered barefoot over the warm stones behind the shrines. I have sat and watched the people come and go in their bright clothes, the women with flowers in their hair, and themselves like flowers, and the young men so straight and slim in their *longyi*s and neat light jackets. I have been up and down the many stairs many times, always at the top meeting with a fresh shock of delight the scent of jasmine and tuber-roses. I have seen the fabulous golden cone reflected in the lake at the other side of the city, by sunlight and moonlight. And by sunlight and moonlight rising above the city in sheer golden purity from its surrounding forest of trees.

I do not merely remember it all, how it looked at these different times, from these different angles, but feel again, recalling it, the emotion it evoked. It is as though the heart itself remembers. Words do not seem adequate to convey such shining beauty; paint might serve the purpose better. But then I think that perhaps the words of Fielding Hall, in which he sums it all up—after describing it as like ‘a great tongue of flame’, and a ‘most wonderful sight, so brilliant in the hot sunshine that it seemed to shake and tremble in the light like a fire’—in a very simple phrase are after all the most telling, since words will not compass such beauty, and there is nothing for it, therefore, but to fall back as he did upon the simplicity of the statement—‘it is a very beautiful place, this pagoda’ . . .

(III)

SOMETHING ABOUT BUDDHISM

IN THE six months that elapsed between my decision to go to Burma and my actual departure I did a good deal of reading about Buddhism. In India in 1949 my curiosity had been sufficiently aroused for me to get a few books from the London Buddhist Society when I returned, but I sought, then, only a general outline; now I wanted not merely knowledge but understanding. Why people believe the things they do believe—or believe that they believe—and think the thoughts they do think, is vastly interesting.

My first intention in going to Burma was to get background for a novel I planned to write—which, indeed, if I am ‘spared’ I intend to write. But the more I turned the idea over in my mind, the idea of the journey and the idea of the novel, the more I realized that I needed a great deal more than merely the physical aspect of the country; I needed to know something of the people, something of their hearts and minds as well as their ways and customs. They were, I gathered, a devoutly Buddhist people. Very well, then, I must, clearly, know rather more about Buddhism than the general outline. I must know something of it as what it in fact is, an attitude to life, a way of life. I must understand the Buddhist habit of thought. Of what I would subsequently write it must never be said, I resolved, as the Burmese people complain of another novel purporting to deal with their life, ‘No Burmese Buddhist would behave like that’, and, ‘it couldn’t happen’.

So I read, and I thought, and I corresponded with Rangoon—with the founder of the Burma Buddhist World Mission, and with the editor of the *Light of the Dhamma*, and asked many questions, so that one way and another I knew before I left for Burma the differences between the pure

doctrines of Theravada Buddhism, as practised in Burma and Ceylon, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, and the break-away movement known as Mayahana Buddhism, and the relation of both to Tibetan Buddhism and Japanese Zen Buddhism—and the 'Western Buddhism' expounded by Mr. Christmas Humphreys of the London Buddhist Society.

In Rangoon, in the first few days, I had long discussions on Buddhism. I visited a meditation centre outside Rangoon and spent two hours in discussion with its founder. I visited a convent, where the youngest nun was a child of nine, and had a similarly long discussion with the school-master whose services had been called in as interpreter, since the senior nun—the 'mother superior' as we would call her—did not speak English. In Mandalay I had exhaustive discussions with eminent Buddhist scholars—the 'cream of Buddhist intellectual society', I was assured, and meeting them saw no reason to doubt it—and attended discussion groups and took part in them. I began to know the Buddhist answers and to follow the line of reasoning. It all began to make sense as a design for living—and dying.

But long before all that, in the days of my youth, I had read *The Light of Asia* with intense appreciation for its beauty and wisdom, and had been impressed by Sir Edwin Arnold's assertion that more than a third of mankind owe their moral and religious ideas to the teachings of the illustrious Prince Gautama of India, who found the light of truth and became the Buddha. He wrote of Gautama's 'stupendous conquest of humanity', and though the Buddha himself discountenanced ritual, even on the threshold of Nirvana declaring himself to be only what other men might become, 'the love and gratitude of Asia, disobeying his mandate, have given him fervent worship. Forests of flowers are daily laid upon his stainless shrines, and countless millions of lips daily repeat the formula, "I take refuge in Buddha!"'

This stirred my imagination, yet I had to see those forests of flowers laid upon the shrines for myself, and not merely to see but share the lives of the people who laid them, before I began really to understand. And then I think I understood more than in all the intellectual conversations in Mandalay.

There was the young girl in Upper Burma who came out

of her room early one morning bearing two cups of coffee on a tray. I was sitting in the living room, out of which the bedrooms opened, typing. Dismayed that there might still be people abed, to whom the cups of coffee were being taken, I hastily explained that I had believed everyone to be up, and trusted that I had not disturbed anyone.

She assured me that everyone was indeed up—it was 'late', already seven o'clock. I explained that I had feared for a moment she might be taking the coffee to still sleeping parents. She in turn explained that the coffee was for the shrine room, 'for the Lord Buddha'.

I said, "But what use has the Lord Buddha now for coffee, since he no longer inhabits the earth?"

She smiled. "We like to do for him," she said, "as though he were still with us."

Later in the day bowls of rice were set before the golden Buddha image in the shrine room. The explanation was simple.

"We like to offer something of our daily food."

Relentlessly I said—I was still new to the country—"It will go bad and must be thrown away."

"The flowers we place on the shrines die and are thrown away. Yet still we like to put them there, at the pagodas, and in our homes."

In every Burmese home there is a Buddha shrine. In the wealthy houses there is a shrine room, where the Buddha image is sometimes of pure gold, set with diamonds and rubies, and surrounded by smaller golden images. The wife in a wealthy household will often take her most beautiful diamond—and the Burmese love jewellery—to set upon the Buddha's brow. In the humbler homes, in the humblest bamboo house in the remotest off-the-road village, there will be at least a picture of the Buddha, set apart in a little shrine in a corner of the room, and in front of it vases of mauve, white and pink asters, and glasses of water; there may or may not be bowls of rice, but flowers and water there will always be, and both flowers and water will always be fresh. Where there is jasmine it is brought in every morning and threaded into garlands or massed like snow, in all its tremendous sweetness, and placed by the Buddha image. Sometimes a whole house will be filled with the sweetness of the jasmine in the shrine room.

It is not like any of the jasmines commonly found in Europe; it grows on bushes, the leaves are shiny and the flowers double, each one a tiny snowy rosette, and not even frangipani has so pervading a sweetness. The girls string it on long threads for their hair, drivers hang it in their cars and lorries, the tri-shaw boys on the handlebars of their bicycles, and it is always part of the elaborate coiffeur of a bride. But where there is no jasmine for the Buddha shrine or the shrine room there are always the faithful little asters, mauve, white and pink, and in the poorest bamboo hut a few flowers will always be found, if not before a Buddha image at least before some small cheap picture of the Buddha.

Probably only a very small percentage of the people who lay the flowers and light the candles before the Buddha images at the pagodas, and who place flowers and other offerings before the shrines in their homes, have even heard of the metaphysics of Buddhism, but they do know very clearly the basic principles, the Four Noble Truths, and that life is *Anicca*, *Dukkha*, and *Anatta*—that is, Impermanence, Suffering, Soullessness (or Egolessness; it is not easily translated in one word. Francis Story¹ translates it as 'without any trace of enduring identity or self'). Central to their faith is the belief that life is without beginning and without end, and we are the architects of our destiny, from life to life, the creators of our own *Karma*. And that *Nirovana*—as it is commonly called in the West, though the Pali word is *Nibbāna*—is the ultimate peace, when the cessation of craving behind all suffering ends the cycle of rebirth.

All this they know, and have known since they were children, and every man has at some period, usually during adolescence, but often younger, been a monk, if only for a few days, and many of the women have spent a period as nuns. Some of them know very much more, for Buddhism is both very simple and very complicated. And to what they know simply or complicatedly, the common people add their personal and private devotions drawn from the spirit world. To the spirits, to the *Nats*, gods who inhabit trees and mountains and the upper air, they make those petitional prayers

¹ In his *Elementary Principles of Buddhism* first published by the Rangoon University Buddhist Association.

for which there is, strictly, no place in Buddhism, which postulates only the unalterable law of cause and effect, but which human nature, in its weakness, needs. It has often been contended, and as often refuted, that the religion of Burma is *Nat*-worship—animism—with a thin veneer of Buddhism. That there are a great many *Nat* shrines is true; but they are negligible compared with the Buddha shrines, which are in every home, and the precepts of Buddhism are indisputably household words. It would be absurd, too, to dismiss as a veneer a faith which colours a nation's whole attitude to life and death. In the West we do not consider that people who have their favourite saints, to whom they show a special devotion, to whom they make special petitions, and in whom they have a special faith, deviate from their central Christian belief thereby. The Roman Catholic Church, indeed, encourages devotion in its followers to those saints who for one personal reason or another most appeal to them as sources of help and strength. The saint, by reason of his or her humanity, is nearer in the spirit world than the Almighty God, just as the Mother of God is nearer than her Divine Son, since she too was human. And the *Nats* are subject to the laws of *Karma* and rebirth and *Nirvana*, which brings them, though ethereal beings, close to suffering, struggling humanity. As they are very often evil spirits it is considered wise to propitiate them with offerings of flowers, fruits, nuts. The good spirits can afford protection and their aid may be invoked in human affairs—which the Buddha's cannot, for he has gone to his Eternal Rest in the Great Peace. When a *Nat* is believed to inhabit a tree the people make a shrine of it and bring offerings to it and no one would think of cutting such a tree down or taking liberties of any kind with it. Strictly speaking there is no place for *Nat* worship in Buddhism either; it is extraneous; but people the world over will always adapt their religion to their needs. Humanity, too, bound upon the wheel of pain and stress, has this inherent need for prayer—for the belief in a power greater than itself, and the supplication of that power.

But the people sitting or kneeling in front of the Buddha images and passing the hundred and eight beads through their fingers, or chanting aloud, or murmuring with clasped hands,

their eyes on the image, are not praying in the Christian sense. Over and over again they remind themselves that life is change, suffering, illusion, that all things possessed of life need deliverance from ill, that only in the light of the *Dhamma* is there refuge; and they repeat the five precepts—to abstain from taking life, stealing, lust, lying, and alcohol. Every lapse from this discipline postpones the achievement of *Nirvana*, just as the piling up of merit brings it nearer—the emancipation from *Samsara*, release from the wearisome round of rebirths. Merit is acquired by acts of charity, especially to monks, and by offerings and donations to pagodas. But good deeds of all kinds have their value in the 'causal continuity which links one life-span to another', to use a Buddhist term. Simply—wrong-doing causes suffering, so that accepting life as a continuous process, and death as merely the connecting link in a chain of lives, the wrong-doing in one life must carry forward into another, and the virtue likewise; so that as we sow so we reap in each successive life.

When I was in Mandalay I made this note on Buddhism: Between what is set forth in the books and proclaimed by the intellectuals, and what is practised by the common people there appears to be a gulf. According to the books there is no prayer in Buddhism because there is no deity who can be supplicated, but a young Burman with whom I discussed the matter—and there were others—insisted, "But we do pray!" and when I asked him, "What sort of things do you pray for?" he replied, "We pray that we may be saved from fire. That we may not be sent to a post far away. That we may have no bad luck. That we may win the state lottery." He insisted that every flower that was offered, every candle that was lit, carried with it a prayer, and to that extent the Buddha was deified. Perhaps he exaggerated. I only know what he declared with such vehemence.

Back in England I turned to Fielding Hall, who knew Burma and the Burmese as it is only possible through love to know a country and its people. I found that he too was initially confused because what was written in the books was different from the observances of the people. He too knew that though there is no place in Buddhism for prayer, as such, nevertheless people do pray—in passionate supplication in times of stress,

to Someone, Something, so that it seemed to him 'that the religion of the Buddha was one religion and the religion of the Buddhists another; but when I said so to the monks, they were horror-struck, and said that it was because I did not understand'.

Then in his perplexity he placed himself in the position of a Burman trying to understand the discrepancy between Christianity as set forth in the scriptures and as practised by the people. In the scriptures he would find the command of the Founder of the religion that we should love our enemies, do good to them that spitefully use us; that we should turn the other cheek, give to every man that asked of us, and to those who took away our goods ask them not again. And he would see that in practice the Christians did not forgive their enemies, but fought bitter and bloody wars to vanquish them, that they invoked the law to punish those who stole from them, and did no cheek turning in either private or public life. He would read that the great Teacher lived the life of the poorest of the poor, but among the Christians he would find that wealth was held in great esteem. 'He would see the lives of men who have become rich held up as examples to be followed. He would see the ministers who taught the Book with fair incomes ranking themselves, not with the poor, but with the middle classes; he would see the dignitaries of the Church—the men who lead the way to heaven—among the wealthy of the land.'

Thus it is true of all religions, that what people say they believe and what they do in fact believe, as manifested by their actions, are two different things. The system of life, of morals, that a man does in fact follow—that is his real belief. 'For,' as Fielding Hall says,¹ 'it is futile to say that a man believes in one thing and does another. That is not a belief at all. A man may cheat himself, and say it is, but in his heart he knows that it is not. A belief is not a proposition to be assented to, and then put away and forgotten. It is always in our minds, and for ever in our thoughts. It guides our every action, it colours our whole life. It is not for a day, but for ever.'

And in assessing the living beliefs of the Burmese, as opposed to the theoretic ones, Fielding Hall found that he had to reject certain dogmas of Buddhism and accept many things

¹ In *The Soul of a People* (Macmillan & Co. Ltd.), 1899.

that—from the point of view of orthodoxy—had no place there at all. He was concerned to explain not what the Buddha taught but what the Burmese believe, 'and this is not quite the same thing, though in nearly every action of their life the influence of Buddhism is visible more or less strongly'. Can as much be said of the influence of their religion upon the peoples of Christian countries? Perhaps of the religiously devout population of Catholic Ireland. Over and over again there are to be found points of similarity between the Irish and the Burmese—who have been called 'the Irish of the East'.

Fielding Hall wrote of the courage of the Burmese soldiers during the wars with the British, though their religion commands them not to take life. They still fight and kill when occasion seems to them to demand it, though the men who are prepared to shoot other human beings would not put a bullet into a pariah dog to put it out of its misery or tread on a cockroach. And when the law deems it necessary to hang a man for some crime he is hanged. Thus are the laws of the Buddha no less than those of the Christ made subservient to expediency. But with this difference, I think—and as I read him I think that Fielding Hall so thought—that the Buddhist does not attempt to deceive himself. He does not attempt to glorify war and killing; he knows that they are utterly and unalterably evil, because what is true is true for ever and in all circumstances. When he wages war he wages it alone; he has no God on his side. When he sheds blood he takes the consequences of that evil-doing upon himself; he has created that evil and he cannot un-create it; its emanations will not cease to exist when he dies—why should they? How can they? In life upon life the consequences of his actions must follow him; there is no escaping it. This he knows.

Despite the similarity in the moral teaching, and in the mythology, there can be no analogy between Buddhism and Christianity, for in Buddhism there is no system of rewards and punishments, no moral judgments, no question of repentance—as such—and forgiveness, damnation versus salvation. Each man makes his own life, and each subsequent life is determined by his conduct in the former one, according to the inexorable law of cause and effect. Man is inescapably his own *karma*.

The gulf between Buddhism as taught by the Buddha and

as practised by the people therefore narrows as we examine it. The main points of divergence are the recourse to ritual—the flowers, candles, joss-sticks—and to prayer. In this no commandments are broken; it is all something dictated by human need. Strictly there is no more place for worship in Buddhism than for prayer. According to the Venerable Jinananda¹ 'there is no worship. Buddhists merely revere the image of the Buddha as it represents to them the figure of the fountainhead of all true knowledge. Images and relics to them are only symbols possessing no inherent power at all.' Flowers, he goes on to say, are placed before the image of the Buddha for two reasons—'as a mark of reverence and gratitude, and as a means of meditating on the eternal truth of impermanence, as revealed by the fading of a beautiful flower'.

On the lighting of candles and the burning of joss-sticks he makes no comment, but the same reasons could apply. But the outsider, confronted with such forests of flowers, such bunches of joss-sticks, such rows of candles, may wonder, uneasily, whether such devotion to ritual may not carry with it at least the risk of engulfing the doctrine, as in Christianity the outward forms have so largely engulfed the inward meaning—except among the Quakers who are completely free of ritual and dogma and have no priesthood.

Then, too, very often much that is trashy and tawdry vulgarizes a shrine that would otherwise be beautiful—dusty paper flowers, paper parasols, greasy hanks of human hair, all manner of shoddy clutter. The Buddha himself, who in his humility and simplicity might conceivably have accepted a few wild flowers from his followers as a tribute if they felt moved to make one, could hardly have done other than turn away in embarrassment and distaste from so garish an overlay of outward show as appears in the pagodas. On the other hand it could be argued that love and devotion are more important than aesthetic effects—or the litter of joss-stick boxes and candle packages flung down in the holy place. Perhaps. Yet is it not permissible to feel that beauty itself should be respected, and that in all religions devotion is more gracious if it cultivates good taste?

¹ In an article entitled *The Doctrine of Reason in The Light of the Dhamma*, Vol. II, No. 1, 1954.

When Buddhists fail to keep the precepts of their religion they do so wittingly, without any hypocritical attempts at explaining away. They know that the law is immutable and know that their wrong-doing will rebound upon them. '*Karma*,' says the Venerable Jinananda, 'is the universal law of action and reaction, or cause and effect by which we can determine our own future by our own deeds. It is the practical and scientific demonstration of the truth, "As ye sow, so shall ye reap."'

Before we finally leave the subject of the Buddha's command not to take life, something must be said concerning a point which the Western mind commonly finds puzzling—the fact that Buddhists eat meat and that on occasion the Buddha himself did so. It is considered that the precept concerning not taking life is kept if the person eating an animal (or bird or fish) has not killed it himself or given an order for it to be killed, or known that it was to be killed that he might eat of it. The Buddha himself laid down the law quite clearly in the sermon known as the *Jivaka sutta*. It is quoted in Professor Edward J. Thomas's *Life of Buddha*.¹ The Buddha, replying to Jivaka, declared that 'in three cases meat must not be eaten: if it has been seen, heard, or suspected that it was intended for the person. . . . The teaching is the same in the *Vinaya*, the book of the Discipline of the Pali Canon, where Buddha is said to have accepted a meal from the Jain general, Sihā, who had provided meat. The report went about that he had killed an ox for Buddha, but the fact was that he had sent for meat already killed in order to furnish the meal. The *Vinaya* forbids certain kinds of flesh, human, that of elephants, horses, dogs, and certain wild animals.' The footnote to this is that '*macchamamsa* is expressly allowed. This is usually taken to mean "flesh of fish", but it may mean, as Kern takes it, "flesh and fish". In any case as the above instances show, meat under proper conditions was permissible.'

This keeping of the letter of the law, with complete disregard for the spirit of it, is difficult for the Western mind to accept. It cannot be regarded as other than the sheerest sophistry—to eat the fish and despise the fishermen (which the Burmese in fact do, regarding the fishing community as the

¹ Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Revised edition, 1949.)

lowest element in society) and eat meat yet despise the slaughterers. The slaughtering trade and the fishing industry exist like all other trades and industries by reason of the demand; obviously all who avail themselves of the services of the slaughterer and the fishermen help to sustain the demand. But since the Buddha himself laid it down that so long as his followers did not themselves take life, or order it to be taken, they were free to take advantage of the life-taking activities of others there is no more—Buddhistically speaking—to be said about it.

All over Burma when I was there were notices 'be kind to animals by not eating them'. These were commonly believed by the English and Americans to be government notices issued in the name of Buddhism. They were nothing of the kind. They were put out by the Vegetarian Society, the secretary of which I met at the discussion groups in Mandalay. Actually Burmans eat more fish than meat, and prawns and shrimps are found in almost every vegetable dish. There is always one meat dish—beef or mutton, but more often mutton, as beef is difficult to get—actually it is prohibited for economic reasons, as during the war the Japanese and rinderpest between them seriously lowered the cattle population, and it is necessary to maintain that population as cattle are used as well as buffaloes for ploughing and for drawing carts. Pork is not an everyday dish as it is comparatively expensive. Poultry—both ducks and chickens—is popular.

U Chan Htoon expressed it as his opinion in an article in a Ceylon Buddhist newspaper that Burma is moving towards vegetarianism, but this would seem to be more in the nature of wishful-thinking than reality. I met only one Buddhist who was a vegetarian, Dr. Soni, Director-in-Chief of the Institute of Buddhist Culture, Mandalay, and he was a convert from Hinduism. The distinguished Italian Buddhist monk, the Venerable Lokanatha, whom I much wished to meet but just missed in both Rangoon and Mandalay, is a vegetarian, and with him as with Dr. Soni it is a religious article of faith. For them both the dual command not to take life and to show loving kindness to all creatures carries with it, implicitly, the refusal to take advantage of the breaking of this moral law by others. Such an attitude is logical, but the fact does remain that it is not essential to Buddhism.

There is very much more to say about Buddhism, and there are very many learned books on the subject. There are so many books on the subject in all languages that the Lord Buddha who sat under his tree and perceived the truth concerning life and death would be astounded could he see them. He himself did not write one word. His teachings were learned by heart by his disciples, the first monks, during his life time; they were known as 'reciters', and 'reciters' have continued in an unbroken line since that time. At the First Great Council, held in India shortly after the Buddha's death, the Recitation was codified and formalized. It was not until the Fourth Great Council, about 20 B.C., held in Ceylon, that the teachings were written down on palm leaves.

Then came the scholars and the commentators, the development of different schools, and the wise, simple, yet profound teachings of the Enlightened One, which are for all men, became complicated, controversial, theological, metaphysical, and a vast mass of material accumulated. And as with the Christians each sect contends that it alone has the formula of the truth. The earliest known form of the Buddhist scriptures is preserved in the Canon of the Theravada school. This Pali Canon consists of three collections known as the *Pitakas*—the Three Baskets—or the *Tipitaka*, the Threefold Basket. The *Pitakas* consist of the *Suttas*, sermons, the *Vinaya*, which is the rules for the monks, with stories and examples connected therewith, and the *Abidhamma*, in which the doctrines of the sermons are developed, a work for scholars, highly technical and complicated. It has been said that the *Suttas* are for the heart and the *Abidhamma* for the head. Each of these Baskets comprises several volumes. It is the function of the reciters to learn by heart the passages entrusted to them, and there is one young monk in Burma today who can recite the entire vast work—but we will come to him.

On the Wesak Full Moon Day of May, 1954 (falling on May 17th), that is to say on the Festival of the Buddha's birth, which is also the day of his Enlightenment, and of his death, for which reason it is known as the Thrice Blessed Day—on this auspicious day there opened in Rangoon the Sixth Great Council, or *Sangayana*, which means, literally, 'together chanting'. To this great synod Buddhist leaders have come

from all over Asia to work for two years editing and revising the Pali texts. The convocation ends on the Full Moon Day of May, 1956. This historic and heroic event has been inaugurated by the Union Buddha Sasana Council (*Sasana* means the teachings of the Buddha) of Burma, a government organization. Thousands of Burmese men and women gave voluntary service for the building of the huge Assembly Cave, designed to accommodate 5000 monks and 10,000 laymen, the four hostels, each of which will accommodate 1000 monks, a refectory in which 1500 monks may eat at one time, a library, a press building, and other fine large modern buildings—all of which will be handed over to an International Buddhist University in 1956.

On the broad plateau, some six and a half miles outside of Rangoon, where this historic and impressive religious centre has been created, stands the *Kaba Aye*, or World Peace Pagoda, a bell-shaped golden cone, like that of the Shwe Dagon, but imposed on a circular modernly designed building. The idea for this arose in 1948 and the foundation stone was laid in 1950. The crowning ceremony, the hoisting of the golden *hti*, was the following year, with the Prime Minister and the President taking part. Thousands gave voluntary service, and the work of building the pagoda was accomplished in record time. Enshrined in the circular building under the golden cone is a huge silver Buddha image made from the melted-down silver from silver bowls, trays, vases, ornaments, jewellery, brought by the people, who naturally acquired great merit through these gifts, as always with gifts made to pagodas.

The artificial cave is a massive—and impressive—hill of stone, its interior a lofty amphitheatre, with a gallery encircling it between the outer and inner walls, its windows looking out over the wooded hilly country rolling away to the Pégú plain.

Ceylon and Thailand are taking leading parts in co-operating with the Government of the Union of Burma in this tremendous project, the Burmese Government and the Union Buddha Sasana Council having expressed the wish that all Theravada Buddhists 'should have a share in this great and epoch-making undertaking'. It is considered that only by periodic revisions of this kind is the 'light of the Dhamma', the pure Buddhist doctrine, to be preserved. The scriptures were

compiled originally in a cave in Ceylon, which is why the cave has been constructed for the Sixth Council. After the Fifth Great Council, convened in Mandalay by King Mindon in 1871, the 729 pages of the texts were recorded on 729 marble slabs, each protected by a small white temple. Each of these canopies is just big enough to cover the slab, which is 4 feet by 3 feet. The official name of this remarkable religious monument—often referred to as ‘the Buddhist Bible in stone’—is the *Kuthodaw*, or *Lawka Marazein*—meaning ‘the royal work of merit’. The rows and rows of gleaming white temples present an astonishing sight in the bright sunshine; at first sight they would seem to be a city of tombs. This Kuthodaw is the devout King Mindon’s greatest religious work, and a monument to the Fifth Great Council as well as to his piety.

Now once again Burma has the honour and the glory of holding the great religious council, this time in the capital city of Rangoon, now the seat of its own national government. But when tribute has been rendered to this noble, this historic work, upon which immense erudition is being brought to bear, still it is in the hearts and minds of the unlearned ordinary people that the essential spirit of the teachings of the Buddha is to be found, the men and women, young and old, who go up and down the pagoda steps, the great pagodas and the little pagodas, all over Burma, Ceylon, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, as part of their daily lives, and for whom the editing and revising of the scriptures by the great Sayadaws and Venerable Elders, whilst they acknowledge its importance, remains as remote as *Nirvana* itself. For them it is as true today as when Fielding Hall wrote over fifty years ago, that Buddhism is ‘such a simple faith that it may all be compressed in a very few words. . . . The real proof of the faith is in the results, in the deeds that men do in its name. Discussion will not alter these one way or another.’ When the great task is completed future generations will have a purified teaching, purged of errors which have crept into the text and the commentaries, so that only the pure light of the *Dhamma* will be propagated by the monks who are responsible for the religious education of Buddhist countries; but the basic truths have never been corrupted, for what is true is true in all circumstances, today, tomorrow and for ever, and it is these simple basic truths which

the people know and revere and acknowledge as Right Thinking and Right Living.

I do not know if anyone has ever counted the number of pagodas in Burma. There are thousands in the ancient religious capital of Pagan alone, noble ruins of a great epoch. In Lower Burma the hills are everywhere dotted with the white cones of pagodas, like lighthouses—or sails that have somehow gone adrift on to the land. In Mandalay there are four hundred pagodas in one place, at the foot of the hill, not counting all the great pagodas and the Kuthodaw. And they are still being built, to the greater glory of the Enlightened One. It is a cliché to say that Burma is the land of pagodas, yet no other designation suits it so well.

(IV)

THE MODERN CAPITAL: RANGOON

BEFORE the refugees from the villages where the fighting was going on—the fighting with the Karens, and the Communists, White and Red, and the Chinese nationalists—crowded in, and the street-traders littered the gutters with refuse, Rangoon must have been a pleasant if not a handsome city. The continually made assertion that 'in the English time' it was 'one of the most beautiful cities in the East' is perhaps an exaggeration. But there are trees in the main streets, and the architecture—what the bombing has left of it—is of an amiable Bombay floridity. Wherever there are trees in the streets a city cannot be without charm, and the trees in Rangoon are very beautiful trees; tall koko trees with pink flowers, little shady neam trees, jacaranda trees, and going out to the lakes avenues of tall palm trees.

The Royal Lake is only just outside the town, and manages to catch the reflection of the Shwe Dagon by sunlight and moonlight. At its edge stands the handsome white Boat Club, to which formerly Burmans were not admitted, but which now graciously accepts Europeans. . . . The lake is surrounded by thin woods and at its far end there is a lovely botanic garden. From the lakeside you may hear lions roar—in the zoological gardens across the road.

There are other lakes, farther out. The Victoria or Great Lakes they used to be called; now they are called the Inya Lakes. There is a Chinese restaurant, its garden strung with fairy lights, where you may dine beside the water and let the sound of Europeanized Burmese music creep—not unpleasantly—in your ears.

I arrived in Rangoon on the Chinese New Year's Eve, and was taken by my host to a Chinese New Year's Eve party. The women and children sat at one large round table, the men at another. Being a European I was seated with the men. The dishes were innumerable, and for the first time I tasted the two great delicacies, birds' nest soup and shark's fin soup, both of which, I regret to say, were wasted on my uncultivated Western palate, as were the choice titbits of pork crackling and goose skin dipped into chilli sauce, and much else that was exquisite and delicately served, and dexterously eaten with chop-sticks—which is an art I have yet to master. But they were very nice about my European clumsiness and my untutored palate, and indeed, encompassed by strangeness as I was, and so newly spun through the air, it might even be conceded that I acquitted myself fairly well. One thing I discovered by attending this party is that the food one eats in Europe in Chinese restaurants bears very little relation to the food eaten by the Chinese. I had further confirmation of this later, eating in Chinese restaurants in Rangoon. I never in all my Chinese eating in Burma encountered those 'noodles' which figure so largely in the menus of European Chinese restaurants. The scraps of pork to be dipped into chilli sauce are common to all Chinese meals in the East, though I have never met this delicacy in Europe, nor the custom of two people eating from the same dish. In the Chinese restaurants in Mandalay you may drink Japanese beer, if you care to, but in Rangoon the beer comes from Glasgow.

The Chinese restaurants of Rangoon and Mandalay are deceptive. Viewed from outside they give an impression of the utmost squalor, with their bare wooden tables and their floors of bare boards, and the harsh white light of strip lighting which is now everywhere in Burma, even in the pagodas. But a cloth of clean white paper is soon placed on the table, and the young man who waits upon you wears an immaculately clean white shirt, and clean white drill trousers. The food, moreover, will be hot—which Chinese food has to be—and good. You will

not get birds' nest soup in these ordinary restaurants unless it is specially ordered some days ahead, for it is a luxury, but there are concoctions of pork and chicken and vegetables in great variety. The greasiness of the meal is balanced by the little shallow bowl of green tea—known as 'plain tea'—which follows it.

This plain tea is drunk all over Burma, and there is no charge for it in restaurants because it is always included, so that if you do not want coffee but would merely like a cup of plain tea you are in a quandary. Whenever you enter a village house plain tea is brought to you as automatically as a paper fan, and very pleasant it is to sit on a bamboo mat on the floor of a bamboo house, fanning yourself and sipping this very refreshing beverage and watching the sunlight drip from the ragged fronds of the wild plantains in the hot glare outside.

Green tea is also to be taken pickled, served with finely chopped garlic and oddments of spices. It can be taken at any time, at the end of meals, or between them. In many houses there is a Chinese tea-basket, in which the tea-pot is embedded in a thick padding in which it keeps hot for twelve hours. The basket is equipped with the shallow bowls, and there is no reason why you should not sit on the floor all day with your tea-basket beside you, once the paddy is harvested. . . . But I speak of the villages. In the towns you sit on chairs, under electric fans, and they bring you cold drinks—pressed oranges, or bottled orangeade from Mandalay—from massive refrigerators run, very often, on kerosene.

But whether it is plain tea or a cold drink, it is unthinkable that one should enter a Burmese house without being immediately served with one or the other, with an accompaniment, more often than not, of bananas or biscuits, or both. The difficulty is to find accommodation for so much hospitality. Yet in retrospect it is not the discomfort one remembers but the kindness, equally in the big houses with the trundling electric fans, and the little bamboo houses where paper fans are distributed with the tea. 'Be seated,' they say gravely, unrolling a mat for you, and once, grandiloquently, 'Take a seat.'

3

Touching upon Burmese English usage, let us deal now with the 'footwearing prohibited' notice in all the pagodas and have done with it. Its literal interpretation is too old and stale a joke now to be even mildly funny. The expression is not, anyhow, more absurd than many expressions which have invaded our English tongue from America and the armed forces. "You see," a Burman said to me, wearily, "if we change it to 'footwear prohibited', as the people who want to improve us are always urging us to, the people will think it's a new rule which means that they mustn't even carry their footwear. The people understand what it means—that the wearing of footwear is prohibited. If the highly educated among our own people have no objection to the expression, why should we mind what outsiders think? If it makes us look ridiculous perhaps it is not more ridiculous than the sight of Western people paddling round our pagodas in their socks, frightened to go barefoot. . . ."

Maurice Collis, in his book, *Into Hidden Burma*,¹ recalls that before the first world war the Burmese permitted Europeans to enter pagodas with their shoes on, but that after the war some nationalist-minded monks preached against this, with the result that by 1920 so strong was Burmese feeling in the matter—their nationalism linked, as with the Irish, with their religion—that it was barefoot or nothing. 'It was foreseen,' Maurice Collis remarks, 'that the British would refuse to take off their shoes, as to do so would render them ridiculous.'

He himself, a British government official at the time, in 1920 entered the famous Arakan Pagoda in Mandalay with his shoes on, having been assured by one of the pagoda trustees that it would be all right. The people, observing him, 'showed no incivility but were cool and distant'. When those with him fell upon their knees in front of the great image he alone remained standing, a conspicuous figure, as he says, with his shoes on. He has the honesty to confess that he felt that he was

¹ Faber & Faber, 1953.

'committing a rudeness', and wished that he had not come. He felt, he says, like an outsider, 'or worse, like an oppressor who was taking advantage of his office.'

Mr. V. C. Scott O'Connor, another distinguished authority on the East, in his well-known book on Burma, *The Silken East*,¹ in a foreword to the new edition published in 1928, wrote that it was 'disconcerting' for him to learn that the Shwe Dagon Pagoda was 'now practically closed to Europeans who do not care to walk barefooted up its stairs'. Astonishingly, he adds, 'Few, quite naturally, are willing to comply with this condition.' He goes on to cite the case of 'an American lady of great refinement' who out of her great love for Buddhism and her great desire to see 'the sacred fane' yielded to this 'unnecessary and insanitary obligation'. He felt that it should be possible to make 'a fair and reasonable concession to the habits of Western people'. But why should any people make any concessions touching their religion to people not of their faith? Is it not an impertinence even to expect—still less demand—that they should? The command, 'Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground,' goes back to the Hebraic story of Moses and the burning bush; throughout the East in holy places from ancient times, long before Buddha, long before Christ—who came 600 years later—people have put off their shoes as a mark of reverence, as in the West they have removed their hats.

Yet even Fielding Hall, writing in 1899,² seems to have been curiously insensitive in this matter, for writing of the monkhood, and how any stranger may enter and receive shelter and hospitality, he wrote, 'we break all their laws; we ride and wear boots within the sacred enclosure'. And of the wearing of footwear in pagodas he continues, 'If you went into a Mohammedan mosque in Delhi with your boots on you would probably be killed. Yet we clump round the Shwe Dagon Pagoda at our ease, and no one interferes.' He adds that the Burman is ready to believe that 'the Englishman's breaches of decorum are due to foreign manners, to the necessities of our life, to ignorance'.

He might also have added 'and to white arrogance'.

¹ Hutchinson, 1928.

² In *The Soul of a People*.

In the East both dusks and dawns are swift. There is no lingering twilight, and no gradual approach to day. When the sunset flames behind the Shwe Dagon Pagoda you must hurry along the palm avenue to reach the end of the lake before it has melted into the soft mauve of the tropical night. But whilst it lasts nature imitating art produces a gorgeous gaudy picture-postcard of an improbably crimson sky streaked with preposterously 'picturesque' black palms. The pagoda then seems briefly made of golden fire with tongues of flame. Then the wild light is withdrawn from it and it shimmers strung with lights against a backcloth of sudden stars.

Dawn comes to the pagoda with a quenching of lights and a tumult of crows. The dogs begin almost as soon as the crows, and then the knock-knock-knocking of the coppersmith bird and the brain-fevered insistence of the unseen bird that shrilly insists 'you're ill, you're ill, you're ill'. The transition from night to day takes only a few minutes, and in those few minutes all living things stir from sleep—human beings, birds, dogs, the cattle that wander the roads, nosing with the pariah dogs into the heaps of garbage. Wood fires are kindled outside the refugee hutments under the trees at the sides of the roads, and kettles and frying pans brought into action—for in the East life is lived out very largely in the open air. People sleep in the open, eat in the open, wash in the open. At the street-corner pumps in the suburbs of Rangoon, and all over the country, you may see men and women filling vessels with water and pouring the water over themselves, the men stripped to the waist, the women with their jackets and bodices removed and their *longyi*s pulled up under their armpits like sarongs. The 'drill' is to pull the clean *longyi* on over the wet one and shuffle the wet one off from underneath. I have never done this at a street pump or beside a lake, but I have done it in the comparative privacy of gardens and back yards of houses where I have stayed in country districts, and for an inexperienced European it is not as easy as it sounds; the problem is to keep the wet *longyi* from slipping whilst you struggle to adjust the dry one.

There is also the problem of underclothes, where to put these garments whilst soaping and water-pouring, and how modestly to get them on again without letting the dry *longyi* slip. Sometimes the washing place is enclosed behind a four-foot fencing of bamboo, which provides both a little privacy and something upon which to hang things. Coping with European clothes when bathing in this way is so difficult that it is better not attempted, and the disadvantages are obvious.

As soon as it is light, in towns and villages alike, small processions of monks are to be seen everywhere making their rounds with their food bowls. Then women come out of their houses with offerings of rice and curry, which the monks must accept without a word. They do not beg, but merely make it possible for the donors to acquire merit—and great merit attaches to the feeding of monks. All food is taken back to the *pongyi-kyaungs*, the monasteries, and shared out. *Pongyis* may not eat after mid-day.

With sun-up, too, the water-sellers come round to every house with their huge barrels on wheels, or petrol tins carried pannier-wise attached to a pole across the shoulders. This I did not see in Rangoon, but everywhere in Mandalay.

5

Rangoon as it exists today was planned by a British officer of the Bengal Engineers, Lieutenant A. Fraser, after the British occupation of Lower Burma in 1853. He was considered to have made a fine job of laying out the city, and a street was named after him. He was probably the first town-planner of South East Asia.

It is ironic that after several years of independence the chief streets of the Burmese capital still retain the old British imperialist names. There is Phayre Street, named after Colonel Sir Arthur Phayre, the first commissioner of British Burma, and parallel with Fraser Street there is Dalhousie Street named after Lord Dalhousie, Governor-General of India and the instigator of the first war of annexation, to name the most important examples. Phayre Street is broad, with trees at either side, and is given a certain distinction by the imposing

portico of the British Council Library. Dalhousie Street's only distinction is that between its starting point, somewhere down in Chinatown on the waterfront, and the Sule Pagoda, there is a line of concrete blocks down the middle turning it into a narrow two-way thoroughfare.

The Sule Pagoda stands islanded where Dalhousie Street crosses the Sule Pagoda Road. Across from it there is Bandoola Square, and here the name has been changed in keeping with the times, for this small park in which a tall obelisk known as the Independence Monument has been erected, was once known as Fytche Square, after a British administrator, but has been renamed after the Burmese general, Maha Bandoola, who lost his life fighting the British in the war in which Upper Burma was annexed in 1886—there is a cannon ball from the battle in the square.

South the Sule Pagoda Road runs down to the Strand Road along the waterfront. Across from the square stands the City Hall, which is architecturally a combination of East and West, stately with pillars, but very Oriental about the roof, with towers like little pagodas at each corner, and the roofing over the main entrance tiered, with upturned gables and spires. Going north to cross Fraser Street the Sule Pagoda Road is possessed by a Broadway garishness of cinemas and crude cinema posters. At the cross-roads there is a merry-go-round of dusty earth where every night crowds of men and boys sit whilst the traffic swirls round them, rather as people sit on the steps round the Eros fountain in Piccadilly Circus, but without any expanse of pavement separating them from the traffic. There is a railway bridge at this end, and a feeling of being already on the outskirts of the city. The chief cinemas are all here, showing American, English, Indian and Burmese films. Loud-speakers relay a raucous music from the cinemas—bioscopes, as they are still called—and there are also poster-covered loud-speaker vans in the road advertising the film attractions, so that there is all the din of a fun-fair, without the fun. Yet there is a certain fascination about this Sule Pagoda Road, with the merry-go-round at one end and the river at the other and the golden pagoda in between. It becomes a boulevard between the merry-go-round and the pagoda, with pavements flanked by koko trees in the centre,

where men and boys squat on the kerbs throwing dice, gossiping, or merely watching the world go by. There are several Chinese restaurants on this stretch of the road, and a large Indian one with a balcony on the first floor. In the hot nights, when the neon lights impose a synthetic enchantment on the vulgarity and garishness, it is pleasant to dine on this balcony and look out over the crowded street, with its black-headed, white-shirted mobs—rather than queues—seething outside the cinemas. There is an impression that every person in the crowd, which seems to be all male, is gripping the elbows of the person in front, and when the box-office opens there is a tremendous impulse forward then back, like a tug-of-war in reverse. The crowd has become a kind of massed cordon, and it is a curious and startling sight when it lurches forward then reels back upon itself. The babble of voices is like a vibrating hum above the clangour of bicycle bells and the noises of motor traffic. Among the parked cars in the middle of the road the tri-shaw boys perch on their bicycles waiting indolently for passengers.

Continuing on, past the pagoda and Bandoola park, you come to the river, and another curious piece of architecture—the Port Commissioners Building on the Strand Road. It has a tall square tower like a minaret, set at the corner of a white building with windows set back from the glare of the sun along shady colonnaded balconies. For a very short distance it is possible to stroll along the waterfront and watch the shipping. It is a favourite place to come to at night, when the lighted ships assume romance, and any breeze that is stirring comes along the river. Indians in their white *dhotis*, ghostly in the darkness, come and squat under the trees, or sit with their backs to the corrugated iron that fences off the docks. They squat or sit crosslegged in small groups, and perhaps this small riverside space is some kind of substitute for the spaciousness of the Gateway of India on the Bombay waterfront. The Indian quarter is close, just in behind the impressive buildings of the Strand; there the streets are narrow and dirty and teeming with life, purely Indian life, and it could be a back street in Bombay or Calcutta or Benares.

The Chinese quarter is not far off, along the river, with bazaar streets behind. There is a fruit market, faintly reminiscent of Covent Garden. Facing the river, but lying back across

a courtyard, there is a Chinese Buddhist Temple, the Kwan Inn Goddess Temple. It contains ornate gilded and lacquer shrines, Buddha images, and images of Chinese deities, including one of the goddess sitting on lotus flowers. There are potted plants standing about on the floor, and a great many dusty paper flowers on the shrines. During the festival season, before the monsoon breaks, *pué* is held in the courtyard, but actors impersonating old men with enormously long beards and wielding enormously long swords make it markedly different from Burmese *pué*. All round the temple when there is *pué* there are food and drink stalls and eating booths. Men, women and children form a dense crowd in the courtyard and along the temple steps. Children and young men climb the surrounding trees. Every now and then someone more interested in the future than in the play enters the temple and after first kneeling before the goddess and stating what it is desired to know—whether some loved one who is ill will recover, whether it is safe to undertake a certain journey, or a certain business venture, and so on—then stands before the shrine and shakes a container full of sticks until one of them jumps out, the shaker having first decided which way it should fall. If it fails to fall in this way the process is repeated until it does so—which it is eventually bound to do. Each stick has markings on it which serve as a reference to particular answers filed in an enormous card index at the entrance of the temple, and which is consulted after the stick has fallen satisfactorily. The readings are taken only from the sticks which have fallen the desired way. If the person who seeks the answers is able to do so he reads them for himself; if not he consults the clerks in charge. A different batch of sticks will provide the references for Chinese medical prescriptions for various diseases and illnesses. It is fortune-telling with a difference. It has nothing to do with Buddhism; it is an accretion, like *Nat*-worship.

The crowd outside, watching the play, is silent and absorbed, and solidly Chinese. They only momentarily turn their heads when two Europeans shoulder a way through them to reach the temple, and inside the temple the intruders are quite unregarded. The fantasy of the play and the fantasy of the future are equally absorbing.

The wharves struggle for miles along the riverside, and the

rats scamper under the parked lorries of the fruit market and among the piled-up refuse. But across the road all is light and colour, gold and lacquer, dragons and mystery and enchantment, an outpost of the Farthest East.

6

Shortly after my arrival in Rangoon I went off on a journey to the deep South, which I wanted to see before the weather became hotter. "But you must be back by the twelfth," said the Attorney General. "That," he insisted, "is very important." February the twelfth is Union Day. It is not to be confused with Independence Day, which is January the fourth, or National Day which is March 27th, and which celebrates the nationalist spirit awakened in 1920 by a great school and college strike in protest against new repressive measures imposed by the British rulers. Union Day celebrates the union of all the states into the federation now known as the Union of Burma.

The festivities begin at seven in the morning with processions of the different tribes of hill people into the city. In the heat of afternoon there are boat-races on the Royal Lake, with the President and various ministers and other important persons watching from the terrace of the Boat Club. The banks of the lake are black with umbrellas raised against the sun. Below this black roofing over the dense crowds there are the brilliant and diverse colours of the *longyis*. Above the roofing of umbrellas the tall palms lean against the dazzling cloudless sky. In the glimmering distance the Shwe Dagon Pagoda gives back the sunlight blindingly from its own hot gold. At the Boat Club, under the awning, there is a great flutter of fans. Indian bearers in white uniforms go round with jugs of iced fruit drinks. The President and his entourage take their place on the settee of honour in the front row, and the races begin. No one appears to pay much heed to the racing. Camera men are busy getting pictures of the President, and heads are turned in all directions to see who is who under the huge marquee. Only the people in the rows of chairs immediately behind the Presidential party have any chance of seeing anything anyhow; behind these rows there are people seated at small tables, from which the water is

hardly visible. Nevertheless teams of young men row very fast and long narrow boats shoot past the Presidential settee. Presently announcements are made and the winning teams are presented to the President. Then silver cups are placed on a cushion from which he takes them and hands them to the team leaders. Long-haired Chins from the northern hills win several of these trophies. Strange it must be to return to a village of bamboo huts up in the wild beautiful northern hills with these valuable silver cups. What do they do with them, where do they place them, in their furniture-less homes? And their long slender boats, hollowed out of whole tree trunks, do they go back with them on the 'planes and trains that brought them here, all the way from the far north? And how can they, who are used to the cool mountain airs, breathe down here on the burning plain—let alone win races in the heat of noon? Yet this they do, and meet the President himself and receive their prizes at his hands.

When the prize-giving is over the President and various ministers and others, including the British Ambassador, and the Attorney General's party, go aboard the Presidential barge, than which Queen Cleopatra herself had nothing more royally beautiful. The deck of the barge is a square platform supported on the backs of huge rosy-chested golden birds which form the bows, their fishlike tails thrusting up in the stern. The roof of the barge is constructed in an ornate Siamese pagoda style, and it is all silver and gold, of a fairylike loveliness, which is enhanced at night by floodlighting. But now its silver and gold is burnished by the hot bright afternoon sunshine, and at each side of the barge are pretty young girls in pale green silk *longyis*, and wearing a festive amount of jewellery, each with several rows of pearls embellishing her transparent white jacket. Their long black hair is worn in bunches down their backs and is festooned with chains of jasmine. Each girl carries a green paddle with which she pretends to paddle the barge, whilst singing the Burma Union Song. The tour round the lake takes about an hour and the girls paddle and sing vigorously and non-stop. The song is sung in Burmese; it greets the President and prays 'for the Welfare State's real coming', and 'that peace on our land may come to stay'. It is a pity that the words of patriotic songs everywhere—with the exception of the *Marsel-*

laisé—are so invariably banal despite the lofty sentiments. The tune of the Burma Union Song, however, is very catchy, and when you have heard it sung over and over and over again, for an hour, you are inclined to go on hearing it even when it is no longer being sung.

Whilst the pretty girls paddle and sing so diligently, no less tirelessly two girls in white, up in the bows, posture non-stop in Burmese dancing, joining in the singing the while. It is all very charming, in an ethereal, fairylike fashion. The President stands and gently waves a white handkerchief to the crowds massed on the low slopes all round the lake, and the crowds cheer, section by section, as the barge passes, all gold and silver in the sunshine, with its dancing and singing nymphs.

When the barge has made the circuit of the lake and returned to its starting point the crowds on the banks disperse, but the festivities are by no means over. The sun goes down but the moon comes up and the night blooms with lights in all directions, with singing and dancing and laughter. There is an open-air marionette show on some wasteland near the lake; the Burmese love marionettes and bring considerable artistry both to the creation of the puppets and to their manipulation. The hands of the manipulators are not hidden, and are as fascinating to watch as the puppets themselves. Some way out of the city there is an open-air theatre, and all that goes with *pwè*—side-shows, eating-booths, toy balloon sellers, open-air film shows. There is no charge for all this—on this or any other occasion. The theatrical company is paid from subscriptions collected in the locality, or perhaps by some rich donor, on the occasion of the opening of some new *pongyi-kyauung*, or the presentation and hoisting of a new *hti* for a local pagoda, or perhaps as part of the festivities accompanying a *shinbyu* ceremony, when a boy leaves home to serve his time as a *pongyi*; or perhaps it is nothing to do with any of these occasions, but simply that because it is the *pwè* season someone has felt moved to acquire merit by providing the locality with entertainment.

At some *pwès* a huge bamboo tent is erected, and the rupee charged for admission includes the hire of a mat to spread on the already bamboo-matting covered ground. People go in at about eight or nine, and from nine till midnight the programme consists entirely of dancing, singing, clowning. After midnight

and until dawn, at about half-past five in the morning, there is serious drama. Whole families go, with young children whom they put to sleep beside them on the ground, and no one would think of leaving until dawn.

One *pwè* is very like another as to entertainment. There are usually two female dancers, who wear traditional Burmese court dress, which consists of a very long *longyi*, some four inches or so of it trailing on the ground, an elaborate long-sleeved *eingyi*, and a good deal of jewellery. The dancers leap and cavort in this costume, dexterously kicking the *longyi* away from their hidden feet. How they avoid tripping over it seems little short of miraculous. Burmese dancing is very largely a matter of posturing, with bent knees and the body bent forward from the waist, and a series of hand and arm movements, but occasionally the dancers must move about—still with knees and body bent—and then the tightly sheathing *longyi* is dealt with by skilful side and back kicks. Between their numbers the dancers retire to the rear of the stage and sit there with their backs to the audience. Behind the scenes of these open-air theatres is open to the public and interested spectators stand round whilst the actors—as they are always called, even when they are only dancers—unselfconsciously make up their faces.

The clowns with their ribald humour, consisting mostly of the *double entendre*, to which the Burmese language readily lends itself, are always immensely popular. *Pwè* audiences laugh heartily, but they never applaud. Burmese orchestras consist of oblong drums, and circles of drums—the drummer standing in the centre—tapped with the fingers, bamboo clappers, flutes, sometimes with brass trumpet horns affixed to them, brass gongs, and sometimes a sweet-toned dulcimer. At first Burmese music sounds harsh, bewildering, discordant to the Western ear; but as one becomes accustomed to it it begins to clarify and assume its own particular pattern and harmony. I am speaking here of the traditional music, not the Westernized version of it heard at the cinemas, and sometimes at the *pwès*.

Pongyis are not supposed to attend *pwès*, or any kind of entertainment where there is music and dancing, but I have several times seen them there. At Moulmein I saw them inside the bamboo tent, five yellow-robed young men in a row, smoking cheroots, obviously enjoying themselves, openly and

unashamed. Such conduct is frowned upon, and I have heard the condemnation carry with it the rider that 'not all who wear the yellow robe are entitled to do so'. But the bad *pongyis* and the false *pongyis* are a product of the cities—Mandalay had a bad reputation in this respect at one time—and whilst their existence is admitted it is generally agreed that the vast majority of the order are worthy of the respect accorded them.

In the evening of Union Day there was a dinner at the Boat Club, attended by the President and the Prime Minister and all the V.I.P's of the afternoon. I was presented to the President and sat with him for a futile moment or two on a settee under a standard lamp at the far side of a large room—for just so long as it took to pilot the next person to be presented across the intervening space. (Fortunately I was taken by U Chan Htoon to meet him properly at the end of my tour.)

Dinner was served at long tables on the terrace overlooking the lake. It should have been romantic and beautiful to have dined there, with the moon and the glimmering water and the barge looking like something out of an Eastern fairytale islanded there in the lake, but instead the beauty of the night and of the setting was violated by loudspeakers which relayed Westernized Burmese music and popular film song hits, deafeningly and persistently. As the Burman next to me remarked, as we struggled with conversation against it, the loudspeaker has become the curse of the East. With strip-lighting as a runner-up; though by the vast majority this is regarded not as a curse but as a boon, because of its cheapness. This means that in every house, café, restaurant, throughout the length and breadth of Burma, wherever there is electricity there this horrible white light is to be found winking away. Even in the pagodas; even against the golden sides of the Shwe Dagon; even in the ancient shrines.

7

At the President's house the following day there was a presentation to a *pongyi* who had performed the prodigious feat

of reciting, from memory, word-perfect, the entire Buddhist scriptures, the *Tiṭitaka* entire. For this occasion, as national dress was obligatory, my hostess lent me a handsome yellow silk *longyi*, a long-sleeved white nylon jacket, a gauzy yellow scarf, and more jewellery than I have ever worn at one time in my life—since no Burmese lady of any standing, dressed for a State occasion, or a social one, would consider one small pearl necklet anything like adequate. As it was the first time I had worn a *longyi* it was thought advisable I should also wear a silver chain belt to prevent any risk of incontinently coming to pieces. A *longyi*, wrapped so tightly round the waist and hips, feels very restricting after European dresses and skirts, and much less cool. Belts are often worn with *longyis* by both sexes; the wearing of them at least prohibits the continual pulling out and refolding of the garment, in the streets, at the pagodas, everywhere, which is considered bad manners, but which is apparently unavoidable if the garment is to be kept tightly in position without wearing a belt to secure it.

The President's house is a huge ugly red brick building in the worst nondescript Victorian style and during the British regime was the residence of the Governor-General. 'The second ugliest building in Rangoon,' the Prime Minister, U Nu calls it (in his book, *Burma under the Japanese*¹)—without specifying the ugliest. (Some people consider the Central Jail the ugliest, others the Secretariat.) Inside, however, all is very palatial. The great golden throne of King Thibaw, the last king of Burma, dethroned by the British in 1885, has been converted into a shrine, with a golden Buddha image with a multi-coloured revolving halo behind his head. In this shrine-room, immensely lofty and pillared, the presentation was made. We all sat on the floor, the sexes as always segregated, and in front of us, on the women's side, sat a row of nuns wearing the usual pink robes, their heads shaven. Facing us all sat a row of extremely aged monks in their yellow robes. On golden silk cushions, under ornamental parasols, in front of these old monks sat two young ones, one of them the prodigy to whom the presentation was being made, the other one also very learned and distinguished. These two young *pongyis* held fans modestly before their faces as they sat, their heads down

¹ English edition, translated by J. S. Furnivall (Macmillan & Co. Ltd.), 1954.

bent, so that they should not look upon the finely arrayed women facing them.

The Minister for Religious Affairs, U Win, gave a long discourse in Burmese on Buddhism, and on the achievement of the young *pongyi* being honoured that day. It all went on for some hours whilst cramp appeared to threaten first in one leg and then in the other in more than one of the audience. Only the nuns and the monks sat immobile, like carved figures. The cool of the early morning wore away and it began to be hot, in spite of the many huge fans whirling high up overhead. Where I sat among the ladies there was a tremendous smell of jasmine from all the strings of it dangling from their glossy hair, which was dressed elaborately, twisted round a cone on top, in the correct court style. Some of them wore tinselled artificial flowers among the real flowers—jasmine, roses, frangipani—in their hair. We moved our fans and shifted our positions, our feet tucked under us. The sermonizing and the reading of scriptures ended and the presentation of gifts was made to the young monk—a most beautiful carved ivory fan from the Government, a camera, a certificate encased in an engraved brass container resting on carved stands—who accepted them all silently, as monks are supposed to receive whatever is given them—not smiling or speaking, but taking them only into his hands, and that only momentarily, in token of acceptance.

When it was all over the venerable monks left first, helped to their feet by the more able-bodied. Then, the sexes still segregated, the rest of us went out and into rooms where we ate rice and delicious curries, seated on the floor, round low tables. And still there was an atmosphere of jasmine and frangipani, and the chatter that now ran through the company made it seem, with the sheen of its bright silks, like a flock of humming-birds.

8

Back at Themis Court I carefully removed all the borrowed finery and lay on the bed under the fan, for it was by then very hot; also after so much floor-sitting it was pleasant to lie stretched out. In this position, too, it is easy to relax and think. I looked up at the mosquito net furled back upon its white

canopy like the sails of a ship and thought of the young monk and his prodigious feat. He had an intelligent, sensitive face, which even heavy pock marks at one side did not make unattractive. I wondered about his mind—whether his astonishing performance had been the result of years of concentration, or whether such a memory was a freak of nature. I wondered how many hours the recitation had taken. Someone had said weeks, but had not specified how many hours a day he had devoted to it. The memorizing of whole books of the Canon by 'reciters' was, of course, I reflected, nothing new in the history of Buddhism, but if it had ever happened before it must anyhow be extremely unusual for anyone to memorize the whole of the Three Baskets, all the volumes of the *Tipitaka*. I wondered about the value of such a fabulous feat of memory.

I regarded the great propeller of a fan whirling overhead. It seemed to be churning up only hot air, like a gathering of politicians; the Japanese fan I had taken to the reception would be more effective, but I could not make the effort to get up and fetch it from the dressing-table, and I have never been able to acquire the Eastern habit of shouting for a servant. I wondered if the young man would find any use for the beautiful carved ivory fan. It was probably meant only for decoration, like those china plates people put on walls. He would scarcely have any use for the camera. Perhaps he had a little brother who would be glad of it. I thought about the nuns who when they first entered I had mistaken for monks, because of their shaved heads.

My thoughts flowed on to the nunnery I had visited recently, where the nuns were little girls, the eldest only about sixteen, the youngest nine, and how I was told that these children even in the little time they are allowed away from learning the scriptures must be always staid and grave—'serious' was the word used. I asked, troubled, didn't they, the little ones at least, ever become homesick? The interpreter volunteered to ask the youngest of them for me. He asked her if she would like to go back home to her parents; she replied that she did not wish to go. "Ask her," I said, "why she chooses to be a nun." The reply, which was prompt, through the interpreter, was, "Because I am willing to go where there is no misery." The interpreter—he was the village schoolmaster—turned to me

with naïve triumph. "You see," he said, "she has been trained!" What was there to reply but a sad, ironic, "Quite so!"

But Burmese people, with children of their own, with whom I discussed this did not share my misgivings about these little nuns. "They can leave at any time," they assured me. But if it should be the wish of their parents that they should be there? I did not press the point. These young growing children keep the monastic rule of not eating after mid-day. But as they do not rush about, giving off physical energy, like children leading normal lives, perhaps that is all right. It was suggested to me that when children have 'something better to do' they don't need to play, that they only rush about making noise and often being destructive from lack of any other outlet. Others said that of course these child nuns did play, secretly, among themselves, if only verbal games. It was difficult to think of dedicated children. But by reason of their background and training these Buddhist children are different, perhaps. Many of them, it was claimed, remembered their former lives. Who is to dispute it?

When I first arrived in Rangoon I inquired about a child prodigy of whom I had been told and who had been giving discourses on the Buddhist scriptures since the age of four. He was by then about eight years old and had preached in Rangoon in the Kodatgyi Pagoda. I learned that he had also preached in the World Peace Pagoda, and in Bassein. He is the child of poor parents, paddy farmers in a village near Tharrawaddy. It is claimed for him that he acquired reading merely by being shown the Burmese alphabet at the time he started to talk. He became a novice in the Buddhist Order at the age of four, and that year, 1950, caused a sensation at an exhibition in Rangoon by his ability to read anything written in Burmese. This appears to be genuine enough, but in the opinion of the Burman who told me the term 'prodigy' as applied to him is too strong. He regarded the child, he said, as "unusually intelligent and endowed with a wonderful memory," and his preaching probably a repetition of sermons learned by heart. He had not met the boy—who is now known by his clerical name of Shin (Reverend) Revata—nor heard him preach, but that is what he thought, what he 'could not help feeling'. The boy now has a small monastery of his own within the precincts of the Kodatgyi Pagoda.

I found other people similarly unimpressed by what, when I had first heard of it, seemed to me so astonishing. Oh yes, they said, we do get such children occasionally; it simply means that they have remembered their learning from former lives. The phenomenon can thus be explained in the light of *karma*, or as one of those abnormal memories which do sometimes occur and in the West are exploited for entertainment purposes.

So much in the East is ringed round for the Westerner with a huge question mark—not necessarily of scepticism but of puzzlement. Pilate's question, "What is truth?" continually reasserts itself.

Because of my interest in meditation I was taken by a *guru* who claimed a good deal of success with pupils from all parts of the world to his meditation centre, where he showed me the meditation cells, explained his methods, and showed me testimonials from various pupils who had attained proficiency in meditation under his guidance. He told me of a young Hindu clerk in his office in Rangoon whom he had converted to Buddhism and taught to meditate. He claimed that since he had learned to meditate the young man had been cured of high blood-pressure which had previously kept him in continuously poor health. Also, since he had received enlightenment, to use the *guru's* words (I made notes at the time), this young married man of thirty had been 'completely without passion', and lived with his twenty-year-old wife as 'brother and sister'. When I suggested that this was perhaps trying for the young wife I was assured that on the contrary she also was in the process of being converted. . . .

The young man was duly produced for me. He was a little shy, perhaps, but he demonstrated his capacity for meditation by falling upon his knees in the shrine-room and going into a trance, his eyes closed. I was invited to lift one of his hands resting on the floor. I attempted this but could not do so. After a few minutes, two or three perhaps, he opened his eyes but remained in position, his eyes half closed. He appeared to be conscious. The following conversation took place:

"Do you remember your former existence?"

"Yes, sir, I was a famous writer."

"What sort of books did you write?"

"I wrote books of philosophy."

Intellectually speaking he would appear to have come down in the world in this incarnation. I said that I would like to know, if possible, something of the young man's experiences during meditation. The *guru* had already told me that the general experience of people who meditated was that afterwards they had a great feeling of mental and spiritual 'refreshment'. I had read this also in Buddhist writings on the subject. The *guru* put the question to the young man now and got the right answer, pat, "I feel refreshed."

I met at the same time another Hindu, this one an elderly man not converted to Buddhism, but who wanted to practise meditation as he had a great wish 'to see the Lord Krishna', which pious ambition, I gathered, he had to date failed to realize.

The *guru* asked him how he was getting on, and he replied, "There are disturbances. There was sexual impulse this morning."

The *guru* assured him, encouragingly, "You'll soon be over that!"

Some months later, however, I met this same Hindu at Themis Court, where there was always a great coming and going of people.

"I have met you before somewhere, sister," he said.

I reminded him of the circumstances, and asked, "How are you getting on with your meditation?"

He looked troubled.

"Slowly," he said. "There are disturbances."

Buddhist 'meditation' is not meditation as generally understood in the West; the word is misleading. It is not religious contemplation, but an emptying of the mind, extremely difficult to achieve. The normal tendency is to think about oneself not thinking—which of course means that one *is* thinking. In the West we know what it is to think (for as Chesterton has observed, 'men at times are sober, and think by fits and starts—') and we know what it is to meditate upon a given subject, from the state of the soul down to the right word in a cross-word puzzle; and we know the meaning of reverie, when

the mind aimlessly and uncontrollably drifts. But meditation in the Buddhist sense is none of all this; it is the achievement of what the Buddhists themselves call 'one pointedness'. Or as David Maurice put it to me once—thinking of the mind in terms of a film reel, meditation is the slowing down of the mind to a 'still'. It is a becoming-aware, not possible without concentration and long practising, for in all that we do we are unaware, every breath that we draw, every flicker of an eyelash. So meditation is often taught by first teaching awareness of every breath, its inhalation and respiration, awareness of that and only that, fining the mind down to that one focal point. Or it is taught by the awareness of every movement involved in raising the hand. The first exercises in meditation are usually these, and the process is long, slow, tedious. And when *Samadhi*, one-pointedness of mind, has been at last achieved, it still remains difficult to maintain for more than a few minutes. When I asked David Maurice once, "When you've achieved meditation isn't it difficult to get back?" he smiled, ruefully, and replied that the difficulty was not to get back but to stay there. There are some Buddhists who shrink from attempting it, yet it is an important part of Buddhism, and the really devout Buddhist will usually attempt it, with varying degrees of success dependent on mentality and temperament.

The contemplation of breathing to assist meditation is called *Anapanasati*. In the words of Nyanasatta Thera, of the Kolatenne Hermitage, Colombo, 'Those who do not need any external objects for their meditation may practise the contemplation of breathing. . . . When respiration has become so refined that one does not feel it at all, one may meditate on the nature of the process, and then on one's body and mind, the base of respiration. One contemplates the rising and passing away of material and mental processes, their impermanence, suffering, and the conditioned nature of all phenomena. Then a vision of reality opens to us as we are thus concentrated. Such moments of unforced, spontaneous, of passive awareness of what is—these are the really creative moments. They transform and mould our character, without our having forced any change. We advance in understanding, peace, happiness, and have an unshaken confidence in our progress on the right path of Enlightenment. We always emerge from such meditation

refreshed, strengthened, as if entering a new world of understanding, love, peace, harmony.'

No one is able to define the 'vision of reality'; the nature of the experience appears to be as incommunicable as the condition of *Nirvana*. There are people who can achieve this one-pointedness for themselves, with no guiding teacher, no *guru*, and they are not necessarily people of great intellect. Others need to persevere with exercises in breathing-awareness for weeks, and such people may be intellectuals, who simply because of the liveliness of their minds find it difficult to concentrate. Sitting or kneeling in front of a Buddha image, in the house or at a pagoda, and meditating upon the Blessed One's teachings and the path of Enlightenment—and there are a number of formulae for this purpose—is another matter. Devout Buddhists, both men and women, go away to meditation centres periodically, rather as Catholic priests go into retreat, in order to give themselves up entirely to the life of the spirit without interruption from the world. But there the similarity ends, for Christian religious contemplation and Buddhist meditation are poles apart. The Buddhist who is able to meditate, for long or short periods, for minutes only or for hours or for days, reaches a level of reality totally removed from the delusions that pass for reality in the physical world. Of this I am convinced. In the case of the young Indian who went so readily into a state of trance I had the feeling that, without any intention on the part of the *guru*, auto-suggestion, or something akin to it, entered into it, and it had, for me, the appearance of a too facile demonstration. More convincing for me was the testimony of people who had practised meditation but found it difficult to describe the experience, which is to be expected, since it is super-normal and a process of enlightenment. Professor Thomas describes the process¹ as the concentration of the mind on a particular object, 'through which it becomes more and more intently fixed, and passes through certain psychical phases as the sphere of consciousness becomes narrowed and intensified, and at the same time shut off from outside influences'. Professor Thomas uses the word 'trance' as a makeshift, finding 'mystic meditation' too vague, and 'ecstasy', borrowed from Western mysticism, out of place. The object of

¹ In his *Life of Buddha*. (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1927.)

meditation is the acquisition of knowledge of the supreme truths. In the Buddha's words, 'the attainment, comprehending, and realizing even in this life emancipation of heart and emancipation of insight'.

The subject is profound and not to be dealt with here, beyond indicating its nature. For those interested there is an excellent book on the subject, *Sattipatthāna, the Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, by Nyanana-Ponika Thera, published in Ceylon,¹ also a little book entitled *Saṅgīti*, published by the Burma Buddhist World Mission,² to commemorate the Sixth Great Buddhist Conference, contains valuable material in this connection and is a useful handbook on Buddhism generally. And there are, of course, the discourses of the Buddha himself, done into English from the Pali by Henry Clarke Warren and published by the Harvard University Press.

9

The shrine-room at Themis Court is very beautiful. There is a large golden Buddha image with a head-dress inset with precious stones, and in the glass case which protects it are also smaller images, delicately fashioned. Early every morning the gong resounds from this shrine-room, denoting the performance of devotions, and so much jasmine is gathered from the garden and placed before the shrine that the whole house seems to fill with that incredibly sweet perfume. Glasses of water are placed there, daily, renewed each morning, and offerings of rice.

Two young servant girls, one Indian, one Burmese, brought in flowers for the hair for the ladies of the house as well as jasmine for the shrine. For the guest these flowers were usually placed on the breakfast tray—a posy of jasmine, a rose, an orchid, or a strange flower called the Bodhi flower—so called because it contains within itself a hooded serpent such as made a canopy above the Buddha when he sat under the tree where he received Enlightenment. This strange fleshy flower has a

¹ The Word of the Buddha Publishing Committee, 139, High Level Road, Nugegoda, Colombo.

² 7, East Block, Sule Pagoda, Rangoon.

thick fringe of stamens and an almost overpoweringly sweet scent, but it perishes too quickly, once plucked, to be worn. The Indian girl seemed to favour this flower for presentation to the guest; she would bring it with a very winning smile, handing it with her two hands in the correct Burmese fashion, which decrees that a gift should never be proffered or received with one hand only.

Another strange flower appeared several times on the table at luncheon, laid on the salad dish beside leaves of lettuce, lime leaves, spring onions, slithers of green mango. It was white, with a speckled centre, very delicate and exquisite, the flowers emerging from a white celery-like sheath. It was to be taken in the hand and eaten like any other item of salad. It was crisp, and honey-sweet. It seemed sacrilegious to eat anything so delicate and decorative. I inquired its name.

"It's an orchid," I was, astonishingly, told, with the added information, "We had soup made from it yesterday. You liked it."

Burmese soups are a little difficult for the Western palate. They are supped during the meal, not taken as a separate course, and the vegetables and leaves contained in them are only partly cooked. I pondered the soup I had liked—"Take a dozen orchids and simmer gently——"

Later I discovered that this charming flower, sold in the markets as a vegetable, is not as I had at first thought one of the terrestrial orchids, which grow from the ground, but belongs to the ginger family. The Burmese called it *Paducksa*, pronounced 'padessa'. The botanical name is *Kaempferia Candida*. I was sorry to learn that it was not an orchid; it was a pleasant idea. . . .

But orchids there are at Themis Court, growing not on trees but in the outer shells of coconuts secured to tall posts. They are watered every morning, along with all the plants and shrubs in pots by the terrace of the house, small mauve orchids which grow in slender sprays, several to a stalk, and small greenish-white orchids with speckled centres, which the Burmese call spider-orchids.

In the deep south I saw all manner of orchids growing from trees as casually as ferns, which was both as delightful and as preposterous as eating the orchidaceous *paducksa*.

MOULMEIN AND THE MONS

MOULMEIN rises in three tiers above the river—there is the waterfront, the main street, and above the noise and squalor of these two a tier of floridly handsome municipal buildings and the residences of officials and professional people—large villas with bougainvillea-covered trellises and pillared porches. Scott O'Connor considered it 'the most beautiful town in Burma', but that was a long time ago. There are the remains of past grandeur along the waterfront in the shape of big shabby old houses with ornate balconies and carved wooden eaves, set among tall palms and spreading banyans.

Dirty narrow side streets lead up into the main street, wide and pavementless, where wandering cows and pariah dogs nose among the refuse piled at each side of the road. This street is clamorous with the bells of tri-shaws—bicycle rickshaws—and with the clatter of the jeeps which appear to be the only alternative transport. There is a faded mosque with twin towers and peeling plaster. Indian tailors squat before sewing-machines on the floors of open-fronted shops. There are numerous open-air eating-booths—at one such I observed a young man eating with half a duck carcase dangling within a few inches of his nose; the thing hung by its neck, its body having been slit down the middle, leaving the head intact on the remaining half.

Between the second and third parallel there is a labyrinth of bamboo houses packed far too close for safety—and indeed a few weeks after I was there a fire broke out destroying three thousand houses and making some twenty thousand people homeless. The fire was believed to have started in a pea roasting shop.¹

¹ *New Times of Burma*, February 19, 1954.

Moulmein, so squalid to walk in, immediately assumes beauty when viewed from the hills above. Even the corrugated iron roofs lose their unsightliness in their thickly wooded setting, bounded by the wide island-studded river and the outlines of low shadowy hills beyond.

On the way up to the big golden pagoda there are shrines housing enormous marble Buddha images. Below the platform at the top the thickly wooded landscape falls away, and near and far there are hills dotted with the 'white sails' of pagodas, and the whole girdled by the shimmering river winding through the hot golden land.

Across from the golden pagoda, on the opposite hill top, there is the 'glass pagoda', with pillars and ceiling of glass mosaic. Below it, carved into the cliff-face, is a huge monolithic Buddha, and in front of it, encircling a great boulder, painted carved figures depicting a Buddhist legend. Above it all a *pong-yi-kyau*, with elaborately tiered roofing and little slender spires, spreads a delicate lovely fretwork against the misty blue of the sky.

Moulmein has no past except in the British Raj. Before Lower Burma was annexed by the British it was practically no more than jungle. O'Connor writing of it during that time describes it as 'less a centre of Burmese life than any other town of its size in the country'. It was a favourite place then for retired government officials. It might have become the capital of British Burma had not Rangoon passed into British hands, with the annexation of the whole province of Pegu; a city connected through its own river with the great Irrawaddy, commanding the traffic for the whole of Burma, was obviously more suited to be the capital than the small town on the Salwin river which commanded only the timber trade. Until then the Salwin had been the boundary between British and Burmese territory.

It was hot in Moulmein. In the early afternoons it was necessary to put blotting-paper under the hand when writing to keep the sweat off the paper. Typing necessitated stopping every few minutes to wipe the hands. The heat seemed to drain the colour out of the sky, and sky and water fused into an arc of molten silver. There was a commotion of crows in the banyan

tree by the house, and in its narrow shade hump-backed bullocks stood, harnessed to their carts, the drivers asleep in the carts, and pariah dogs asleep beneath. In the house servants lay about on the polished floors, dark heads pillowed on golden-brown arms, bare feet upturned like the feet of the dead. The whole house would be given over to siesta. The marble paving of the balcony was so burning to the bare feet as to be intolerable, and the hand could not rest more than a split second on the balustrade.

Yet in the heat of the afternoon a blind boy sat singing in the sun outside the 'Truth Shrine' at Kyaikmaraw, near Moulmein. He was not begging. He sang because he had nothing else to do, and he liked to sing. It was his way of passing the time. Under the roof covering the path that led up to the shrine women and old men sat on benches passing the time in contented idleness. Children rushed about, bare brown feet hardened to the hot brown earth. Gaunt pariah dogs, many of them almost hairless, prowled in search of odd grains of rice. In the shade of crowding palm trees and banyans the bamboo houses of this township on the Aataran River assumed the somnolence of the tropic noon. The barbet, the coppersmith bird, knocked interminably, and somewhere out of sight the you're-ill bird insisted shrilly. In the Truth Shrine a huge central Buddha is flanked by rows of Buddhas. People used to go there to settle their differences—"but nowadays they settle them in the law-courts".

The bamboo houses stand on piles and are thatched with leaves; two layers will last a year. When the rains first come the thatching leaks, but when it is sufficiently soaked it becomes rain-proof.

There are rubber plantations in this district, thin woods of slender trees; and there are betel-nut palms, and coconut palms, and toddy palms, from which the country drink is made. Taken in the morning this drink is innocent as coconut 'milk,' but taken in the afternoon, after the sun has been on it and it has fermented, it is powerfully alcoholic. It does not keep; the longer it is kept the more vinegary it becomes. A delicious black treacle called *jaggery* is also a palm product. And there are cachou-nut trees, and bananas hanging in fat green and yellow bunches, and over the tangle of jungle at each side of the

road, stretching away in all directions, a mauve creeper spreads a soft grapelike bloom.

Strictly the people in this Tenasserim Division, which stretches from Toungoo, bordering on the Southern Shan States, down to Victoria Point, bordering on Thailand, are not Burmese, but Mons—or Talaings, as the Burmese call them. The indigenous races of Burma derive from Mongoloid stock, the chief groups of which are Tibeto-Burman, Mon-Khmer, and the Tai-Chinese. The Talaings of the Irrawaddy delta and the Tenasserim Division may be described as the Burma branch of the Mon-Khmer. Fielding Hall is very emphatic about it that what is called Lower Burma is not really Burma at all.

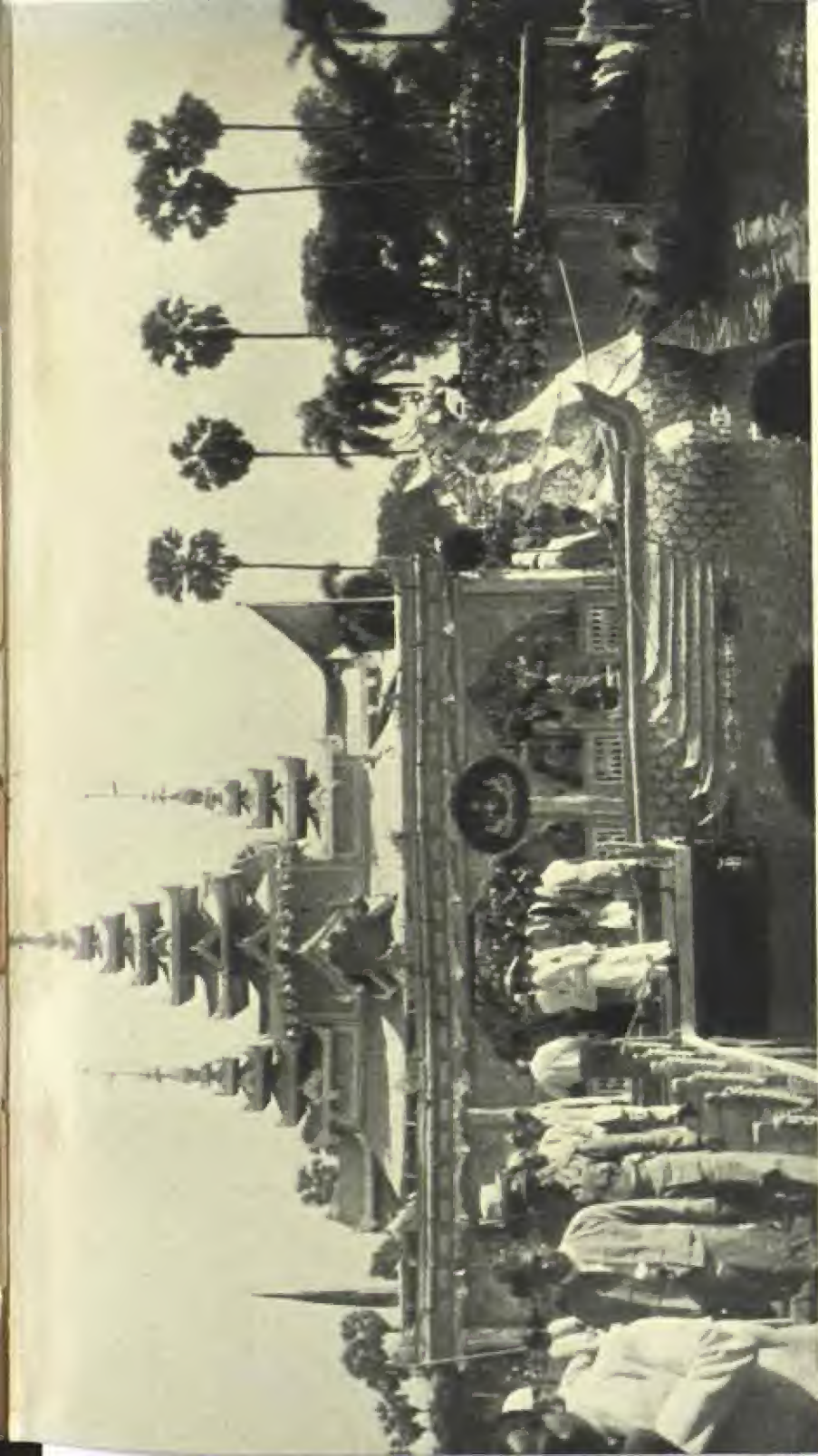
‘The home of the Burman is in the dry zone that lies about the old capitals of Pagan, Sagaing, Shwebo, Ava, Amarapura, and Mandalay,’ he writes.¹ ‘It was the people of these districts who founded the various kingdoms of Burma, and who alone are rightly called Burmese. The people of the delta and Tenasserim districts were Karens, and Peguans or Talaings. They are races very closely allied to the Burmese, but they are distinct. They differ in their dialect, in their appearance, and in their capacity.’ They were conquered by the Burmese kings, and ‘when we invaded the delta in 1825 the natives arose in revolt against their Burmese conquerors and assisted us. After 1825,’ he continues, ‘when we returned these provinces to the King of Burma, the immigration of Burmese from Burma proper to the delta increased. The dry districts of Upper Burma were practically full, and the surplus population drifted down to Lower Burma to the vast swamps which their energy made into rice fields. The administration also became Burmanized, so that when war broke out again in 1852 we found Lower Burma more Burmese than before. . . . After our annexation of the delta the tide again turned; the Burmese cultivators, who, following their armies, had come to Lower Burma to settle, returned. They did not like our rule, and they went back to Upper Burma in large numbers.’ They returned, however, because Upper Burma was not fertile enough to support so big a population, and the flow back to the south was intensified after the British annexation of Upper Burma—in the final war

¹ In *A People at School* (Macmillan), 1906.

of annexation—in 1885. Writing in 1906 Fielding Hall observed that 'Lower Burma is now become entirely Burmese. The Talaing has disappeared, absorbed in the stronger race. Even the Karens in the West are now calling themselves Burmese.'

These people, the Mons, or Talaings, were always Buddhists. The Shwe Dagon Pagoda was originally founded by them when Pegu was the Mon kingdom. They lost the pagoda and all else to King Alaungpaya in 1755, when he named the village at the base of the pagoda hill *Yan Kon*, meaning 'the end of the war'. It is often claimed that it is to the Mons that the Burmese owe their pure—Theravada—Buddhism, and, basically, their culture. King Anawratha, King of Pagan, occupied Thaton, in the South, in A.D. 1057, and the Mons are said to have influenced the religion and culture of their conquerors. U Kyin, Burmese Ambassador to India, in a talk given at New Delhi in 1952, supports this popular theory, adding in connection with it that 'in making the art and culture brought from Thaton his own the Burman in his turn transformed and adapted them, conferring on them his own distinctive imprint. Thus, from the middle of the eleventh century a single unmistakeable line of descent is traceable throughout, which makes it proper to speak of Burmese art, Burmese history, and Burmese culture.' Professor Gordon Luce, however, in a scholarly article on Pagan in the July 1954 issue of the *Guardian*, disputes this as 'far from accurate' on the grounds that many of the pagodas attributed to Aniruddha (Anawratha) have 'rarely . . . more than modern "Copies" or legend to justify the attribution', and because the name *Mahapinay*, the Burmese title for the Indian elephant-headed god, Ganesa, 'occurs more than once in pagodas attributed to Aniruddha'.

The Mon villages of the Tenasserim Division today have their troubles—insurgent troubles. So that when we set out in a government launch to go by river to Kawhrat and Kadoc the township officer considered it advisable to take an armed escort. It is generally accepted that many 'insurgents' are now often little if anything more than common dacoits. They have a habit of swooping down on a village and levying a 'tax' per head on the villagers, and demanding food of them, and then disappearing into the surrounding jungle. By the time the



Union Day, Rangoon : the Presidential Barge



Riverine village, Lower Burma

police or military reach the scene they have vanished. Sometimes they take over a village and run it; then when the police turn up there is a battle, with loss of life on both sides, and as likely as not the village gets burnt out. This is what happened to Kawhrat, where the bamboo houses have vanished completely, and only the foundations remain of the stone-built ones.

At Kawhrat the religious buildings, a little distance from the village, remain. The shrine is splendid with glass mosaic pillars and teak carvings, and there are two huge Buddha figures each carved out of a single trunk of teak, but the beautiful wood is gold-leafed over and studded with precious stones. There are gaunt skeleton figures, almost life-size, often placed in pagodas to remind all people to what pass of sickness, old age and ultimately death they all must come. But the people pass in and out in their bright clothes, talking and laughing, both men and women smoking their cheroots, laying their flowers, kindling candles and joss-sticks, kneeling for a few minutes and repeating the formula concerning suffering, impermanence and change, but the sun shines, the jasmine gives out its sweetness, the flame trees are scarlet against the brilliant blue of the sky, and white doves perch on their leafless branches, and all is vivid and scented and life luxuriant—the powerful jungle life of the East. And when the hot wind moves over the glimmering gold of the pagoda *hti* all the little bells utter their thin sweet music.

There are red jasmines and white jasmines along the path to the novices' house, where the young *pongyis* serve their novitiate. There is the sound of their chanting, and the distant knocking of the coppersmith bird. Impermanence, suffering, change. But the sad truths of existence mean no more in the hot bright sunshine than the shrill insistence of the you're-ill bird.

The paving stones are hot to the bare feet and it is a relief to leave the sacred precincts and walk in the shade of banyan and neam trees. Women draw water from a circular well with a stone parapet and a gabled roof. An old man holds out a begging hand and one of the party acquires merit by putting a few coins into it. There is a sing-song of children intoning their lessons in a modernly built bamboo State school.

We follow a sunbaked path through the harvested paddy

fields and come into a shady road of deep dust. We are on our way back to Kadoe village, huddled among its palms and plantains, and looking from the river like all the most romantic imaginings of a South Sea island. We landed there an hour or more ago with our guns, our servants, our hampers of food, and we cannot leave for hours yet, for the tide has dropped and the launch is now sitting in the mud waiting for the evening tide to refloat her.

In the main street of the village there are open-fronted shops where you may buy cloth, slippers, fruit, vegetables, sweets and biscuits made in England, rice, spices, dried fish, tortoiseshell combs. The prevailing colours on the fruit and vegetable stalls are red, purple, and the vivid green of gourds. Beyond the shops are a few small bamboo houses, some leaf-thatched, some tiled, and all on piles. At one side of the road, some four feet below the level of the road, there is a narrow stream. Where the stream passes the houses bridges of poles are laid across from the road to the small compounds. Beside the stream and all about the houses there are banana trees and coconut palms and mango trees and various flowering trees—one has white blossoms and ferny leaves and seed pods about a foot long. The bamboo houses seem one with the lush vegetation among which they are set, part of the strong green tide of the jungle which has flowed down to the edge of the road. At the top of the wooden steps of each house there is a verandah which runs right round the house, the rooms raised a few inches above the floor of the verandah. Shoes are left on the verandah or on the steps up to it. On some of the verandahs there are wicker chairs; on others people sit on mats.

The house we enter is of the same style as the rest but a little larger; it belongs to a trader. We step off the verandah into a largeish room, lofty as a barn, and raftered. At the far end there is an iron barred window with a shrine to the left of it, and a table with a pile of tattered books and magazines at the other side. On the shrine there are gaudy green and blue vases containing bunches of teak leaves; the effect at a distance is rather that of small aspidistras. An Aladdin lamp is suspended from a beam on a long wire.

At night, when the shutters are closed over the windows, and the doors on to the verandahs are barred and bolted against

dacoits, the heat in these bamboo houses is intense. This room is ventilated by a fretted wooden screen above the window at the shrine end. Later I was to spend nights in hermetically sealed rooms with no such ventilation. The Burmese are very security-conscious, and with reason.

In this house there was a table, with a few chairs placed round it, and on the verandah some wicker chairs and tables, but in most Burmese village houses there are no chairs or tables; people sit on the floor on bamboo mats which are kept rolled up in a corner when not in use. At mealtimes large plantain leaves are spread on the mats—a form of ‘tablecloth’ both beautiful and hygienic, and as labour-saving as the pleasantly bare houses themselves. There is always a shrine in one corner of the room, and usually a cupboard, and more often than not wire lines across the room on which to hang things. A low broad wooden platform which will accommodate three or four provides a bed—for the children, perhaps—in one corner of the room, and for the parents there is a partitioned-off cubicle; as this is not roofed one centre light serves for all. The kitchen is separate, at the rear, and unless the house is built on piles opens into the compound. The earth closet is a little hut across the compound, and is usually set about with plantains. The kitchen in this trader’s house was a few steps down from the main room. The cooking is done in the hot ashes or over burning faggots in a raised stone fireplace rather like a table. An astonishing number of excellent dishes were cooked on this primitive hearth, and without any taste of smoke on them—a variety of curries, fish, meat, vegetable, chicken, and the thin soup which always accompanies the two main Burmese meals.

Burmese food is so interesting and pleasant—and quite different from Indian food or Chinese food—that perhaps here is the place (whilst the meal is being got ready on the primitive fireplace and we all sit round in cane chairs on the verandah or on bamboo mats on the floor inside the house, fanning ourselves with flat oblong Burmese fans) to say something more about it. A little is taken from each dish and placed on the plate on a mound of rice—and Burmese rice is surely the finest in the world, with long fine grains, each one separate when cooked, and bearing no relation to the gluey mess which is the general

English conception of boiled rice. Eastern people find the idea of cooking rice with milk as a 'pudding' very odd indeed—odd past all imagining; rather as we should the idea of bread mashed up and eaten as a pulp . . . though there is, to be sure, the disgusting mess known as bread-and-milk. There may or may not be meat and chicken among the dishes, but there is sure to be several kinds of fish, and one of them will be prawns or crayfish, cooked in their thin shells. There is always, also, a plate of salad—consisting of pieces of raw cauliflower, pieces of tomato, tiny green mangoes, perhaps some lettuce, and certainly some leaves from various trees—lime, citron, coriander—and mango flowers, and the white 'orchid' flowers mentioned earlier. Various leaves and flowers go into the soup, too, but they are only very lightly cooked in the stock—which is usually a fish stock, but may be meat—so that they are just not raw. There is always a vegetable dish—again the cooking is only very light, or perhaps the vegetables have been soaked in vinegar and dressed in some delicious way with fried garlic and *ngapi*, the traditional condiment made of dried and pounded prawns, which smells very evilly, and is very salt, but also very tasty. There is always chilli sauce, and sometimes green and red chillies raw. The vegetables may be cauliflower, cabbage, brinjals, or all of them together. The curries are not curries in the Indian sense—that is to say they do not contain the hot spices used in India—there is always the chilli sauce and the raw chillies for those who like their food hot—though pounded chilli and ginger are used, and garlic for flavouring, and it is hot by Western standards. Sweets as part of the meal do not occur much, though there is sometimes a coconut dish with *jaggery* sauce to be met with, or a *crème caramel*, or a dish popular in India made from milk, little round balls which look as though made of semolina, soaked in some sweet syrup, and each ball a delicious *bonne bouche*. It is more usual, though, to conclude the meal with fruit—oranges, apples, bananas, grapes, then *pan* is passed round—betel-nut wrapped in leaves smeared with a paste of lime—and pickled green tea or preserved ginger, and shallow bowls of green tea, to follow coffee or served alone. The number of dishes varies, of course, but curry and rice there always is, and the soup, vegetables, salad, *ngapi*. For those who wish to drink with the meal there is water. In unorthodox

Buddhist houses whisky is served before dinner, but it does not reappear later. In the more Westernized households, in the towns, men and women sit down to meals together, but in poorer homes, and in the country, it is usual for the men to be served first, the wife waiting on her husband, and then the women and children eat. This seems odd in a country where the freedom and independence of the women is stressed, but it is an arrangement which apparently the women themselves prefer, generally speaking. It is hardly likely that the custom would prevail did the women not prefer it, for there is no attempt on the part of the men to dominate the women, either in the home or out of it.

In the trader's house in the village of Kadoe the women all ate together, sitting on the floor and eating with their fingers in the traditional Eastern fashion, after the men were served. I was seated with the men at a table, as at the Chinese New Year's Eve party in Rangoon, and supplied with a spoon and fork, despite my protests that it was unnecessary, since from my Indian travels I was well used to eating with the fingers. The East seems to find it difficult to believe that the West can adapt itself to their customs, though they continually adopt ours—too often the ones least worth adopting. After the meal bowls were brought to the table and we washed our hands, then sat round to drink green tea, smoke cheroots, chew *pan*, wait for the heat of the day to pass—and the tide to rise. Spittoons like enamel chamber-pots stood about for the convenience of the *pan* chewers, who always seem to do as much blood-red spitting as chewing. A mattress had been made up on the floor in front of the shrine, but no one retired to it despite the somnolence of the afternoon. Conversation ebbed into silence. It was the hour of relaxation and siesta.

As much from curiosity as from need I inquired for the latrine and was conducted through the kitchen to a cupboard opening out of it. There was a slatted wooden floor, an enamel pot in a corner, with a lid, and brass water vessels round the walls. The ground some twenty feet below had become a kind of soak-away. I was invited to wash on a verandah adjoining the latrine. Some wooden stairs led up to the verandah—the 'sweeper's' entrance, the sweeper being as in India the servant who attends to the emptying of chamber-pots and commodes

and the cleaning of latrines. In Burma the sweepers are invariably Indians. In India they are the casteless Indians—the 'untouchables'. Some consternation was caused when I made to wash my feet in the bowl I had used for my hands. Another bowl was brought for this purpose, and another towel. Then a silver bowl was brought for me to wash my hands again—that a silver bowl was brought was a special gesture for the honoured guest. The water was poured away through the slats of the verandah floor.

On the way back through the kitchen I observed a woman ironing with a big heavy iron such as is used in country places in Ireland, but instead of a red-hot stone inside the iron burning charcoal was used. I later saw a similar charcoal iron in Mandalay. A huge stone jar full of *ngapi* stood against the wall, and another Ali Baba jar of salt. The kitchen was very clean with a number of well-polished brass and bronze pots and pans hanging up. The women were interested in my interest in their cooking arrangements, and through an interpreter I explained to them how we cooked and ironed in the far West of Ireland, in small houses of stone no bigger than the bamboo houses of Burmese villages, that we had no electricity and used oil lamps as they did. They wanted to know if much rice was grown in Ireland. . . .

Back on the verandah at the front of the house it was pleasant to watch the life of the village flowing up and down the main street, lightly stirring the red dust with slim slippered feet. There was a continual movement of people, but no traffic except an occasional bicycle. Human beings were the beasts of burden. Women passed with wooden trays of large red tomatoes balanced on their heads, or holding gaily painted sunshades or black umbrellas against the sun. The orange robes of a group of *pongyis* were almost blinding in the glare of afternoon. A man passed with a pole across his shoulders and kerosene cans of water suspended from either end. In the dim interior of the small leaf-thatched house opposite a woman sat on the floor dandling a naked baby. A man came out on to the verandah and laid down a plantain leaf with some rice on it and the pariah dog slinking below the steps ascended them, uncertainly, its tail between its legs. It drew near the food, then shrank back as a child tottered out on to the verandah. But

the child had no designs on the dog; it merely regarded it for a few moments before swaying back into the house. The dog wolfed the rice, then looked hopefully at the woman seated just inside the room—the forlorn hope that is really without hope—then slunk back down the steps and disappeared into the tangle of plantain and palms surrounding the house.

Chickens pecked in the deep dust of the road. Children ran in and out. The armed guard sat in the shade kicking their heels and looking bored. In the drowsy peace of this village it is difficult to imagine fighting, yet Kadoe was involved in 'the troubles' that destroyed Kawhrat a mile or so beyond. There was the heavy scent of frangipani from the tree reaching above the end of the verandah. The two Indian servants of our party shook down the velvety white blossoms for the children, whose restlessness even the afternoon heat could not subdue.

The sensitive faces of the Indians suggested an intelligence which should, one felt, have fitted them for something better than their menial state. It was impossible not to speculate about them.

Then at last a hot light breeze stirred along the river with the turn of the tide and it was time to return to the launch. The people watched us with a mild interest as we went back down the landing-stage—the party of strangers from the town, with the armed escort. They regarded us with the same mild interest they had evinced in our arrival, with neither hostility nor welcome. The morning tide had brought us to them, impinging for a few hours on their lives; the evening tide would take us away. They would continue to squat beside their water-melons, their baskets of pappas, tomatoes, cabbages, dried fish, their cooking pans on charcoal fires. We came from the city and our lives were remote from theirs lived out in the bamboo houses among the sheltering plantains. But a few assembled at the landing-stage to watch the launch put out into mid-river, and children laughed and splashed in the water, showing-off before strangers as children do the world over. They formed a brilliant patch of colour massed on the slope down to the landing-stage and on the banks at each side of it; the sun made the bright reds and blues of the women's *longyis* curiously luminous. They stood motionless, but laughing and talking among themselves. When we were well out into the

river they lost interest in us; their massed colour dissolved and broke and dispersed like a spent wave, and Kadoe lost its identity and became a straggle of bamboo huts half hidden among the crowding South-sea-island lushness of plantain and palm.

A little way out from Moulmein we put the armed escort ashore, but that was not the end of 'security', for the night was made hideous by the resounding clangour of the house gong struck every hour to indicate that the night-watchman was awake.



Typical small pagoda, Lower Burma



Lumber elephants, Bharno, Upper Burma

(VI)

THE DEEP SOUTH: MERGUI

THERE was no one to meet me on the airfield at Mergui as the telegram from Rangoon postponing my arrival had not been received, and the Superintendent of Police and an armed escort had all turned up the day before. Seizing the initiative I telephoned an Australian mining engineer, Mr. Leigh Elsum, to whom I had an introduction from Mr. Norman Lewis. Despite the fact that my name meant nothing to him he was good enough to say he would 'come over' at once.

He proved to be lean and wiry and browner than many Burmese, with the free-and-easy, readily friendly manner of the colonial. Sure, he could put me up for a day or two.

The car bumped away across the shadeless airfield where the heat shimmered like water. There were rubber plantations at the far side, thin dark trees flanking a desert of burnt-up grass. People grouped themselves in the hot shade under the wings of the 'plane. In the near distance there were hills, with the inevitable pagodas. I observed to my host that I should be interested to see the tin mines.

His smile was sardonic as he replied, "So should I!" He hadn't seen them for years—insurgents, he explained. Similarly there were rubber planters who hadn't seen their plantations for years.

I asked the obvious question—"If it's known that insurgents are running these concerns why doesn't the Government act?"

The answer was that government troops were tied up fighting the K.M.T's—the Chinese Nationalists—in the Kentung State. But for that the mines and rubber estates could have been liberated years ago. "But the government will get the upper hand of it all eventually—the end's in sight already."

When Burma received independence early in 1948 ten

thousand Chinese Nationalist troops moved into the north-east corner, the Kentung State. They were supplied by 'planes from Formosa, and claimed to have American backing. America denied it, but I found it widely believed in Burma. There were, it may be remembered, continual requests by the Burmese government for the evacuation of these troops. When they began assisting the Karens—who were demanding a separate state—and raiding and burning villages, it became necessary to resort to military measures. This war was still being waged when I was there early in 1954, though it was over by the time I left, in April,¹ and soon after that saw the pacification of the Karens. Leigh Elsum's conviction that, in U Nu's words, 'the people will win through', was vindicated, and as it turned out he saw the mines again earlier than perhaps even his optimism had expected, for early in May the Karen insurgents ninety miles outside Mergui surrendered and he and his colleagues were able to take over again. Even before then, in April, the rich wolfram mines in Nam Yen, south-east of Mergui, were liberated by government action and work in them resumed. In the central area, between Mergui and Tavoy, mines and rubber estates were cleared of insurgents without fighting or loss of life—the rebels were not merely induced to surrender but to co-operate with the Burmese troops in pacifying the district.

But in February of 1954 it was a very different picture, with the fighting—against the K.M.T's, the Karens, the Communists—still sporadically going on, and the patient optimism of Leigh Elsum was something to marvel at. It was, moreover, in striking contrast with the attitude of others who cynically refused to believe that the government would make any move to recover the mines and plantations until it was ready to nationalize them.

We skirted the town and climbed a little through pastoral country, high enough to see the brilliant blue water of the Andaman Sea and the heat-misted outlines of the islands of the Mergui archipelago. From above, Mergui seems to lie half smothered in a lush tropical vegetation of palms and plantains, like a South Sea island. It is one of those places to which distance lends enchantment.

¹ On June 7th it was officially announced at Taipeh that the evacuation of Nationalist Chinese guerillas from Burmese territory had been completed.

We came to a tall wooden house rather like a mill-house, surrounded by cachou trees and papya trees, and great leafless flame trees with their scarlet clusters of flowers, each separate flower of which is like a lily. There were red lilies in the garden, too, coming up everywhere on shady banks, single blooms on tall leafless stalks. On the verandah of the house there were children and dogs and a slender Burmese young woman with a very sweet face. She carried a tiny doll-like baby with a shaven head.

"My wife," Mr. Elsum said, "Ma Pyo. But the baby isn't ours. She belongs to a Ghurka family living down there——" he indicated a bamboo hut among palms and plantains at the bottom of the slope. "She's fourteen months old," he added, "and an auntie. The children bring her up here sometimes."

The baby's mother emerged later from the dark little hut and called up the slope for its return. She was heavily pregnant. I asked how they lived and was told that the man earned a hundred rupees a month as night-watchman—about eight pounds—and sold the milk from his cows. There is a big Indian population in Mergui; some of them are traders, but mostly they do the menial work of the town. On the way up to the house we had passed a Pathan village lying back from and below the road. The wooden huts clustered among their tropical vegetation seemed curiously self-contained and remote, and as though peace came dropping slow from the broad leaves of the plantains that sheltered them. The Pathans are from the North West Frontier. They are a handsome people, the men tall and big built. These Mergui Pathans have married Burmese women and formed themselves into this village colony. They keep goats and cows and sell the milk. Some of the men have employment as night-watchmen. They live peaceably and reasonably prosperously in their snug, sheltered village.

It is altogether a peaceful corner of Mergui there, just outside the town and raised a little above it. There is an avenue of palms below the house, and the land rises in a gentle slope to a small pagoda, and flows gently down on the other side to the thicket of palms and plantains surrounding the Ghurka dwelling. Between tall plantains there stands, on a cement platform, a large stone-parapeted well, with a windlass above it.

At the top of the three-storey house it is like being in a tower.

The windows look out on to five hill-top pagodas which from sundown are jewelled with lights. At night there is only the thin shiver of pagoda bells and the small unceasing clamour of cicadas. And the sudden chatter of a lizard on the wall of a room.

As soon as it is light there is a beating of gongs and clappers from the nearby monastery, and later the shrill voices of the *pongyis*' pupils reciting their lessons.

But to descend into the town is to end enchantment. As with Moulmein, the setting of the town is beautiful but the town itself is squalid, the squalor beginning at the waterfront as in Moulmein, and receding as the town climbs in tiers to the foot of the pagoda-dotted hills. There is the usual street-refuse, the horrible pariah dogs, the open-air eating-booths, but here the tri-shaws are replaced by rickshaws drawn by Indians. Old Indian women in dirty white saris, the end loosely thrown over a shoulder and sagging breasts discernible as they walk, carry laden baskets on their heads. The great Indian sadness is here debased to abjectness.

Mergui is a fishing-town, and along the beaches of the Strand fish are laid out to dry. The stench from this drying fish is so strong that the wind carries it up even into the hills, to the nostrils of those who live in the residential areas. But for this incredible stench, powerful enough to keep even the pariah dogs away from the fish, the Strand would be a very pleasant promenade, with its dark old wooden houses huddled behind huge banyan trees, some with orchids growing on their trunks, and numerous tall palms.

Behind the Strand is a street of Buddha shrines, and behind that again the residential quarter, at the foot of the hills. At the end of the Strand a conglomeration of wretched huts approached across a wasteland denotes the quarters of the despised fishermen.

Mergui is famous for its pearls, and its edible birds' nests. We called on an old Moslem pearl merchant, Mr. A. S. Mahomed, living in a big airy house which was a kind of maritime museum, its walls lined with glass cases containing shells of every variety and size, from enormous conches down to the most minute shells imaginable. In the collection there is a huge oyster shell with a blister which was thought when it was brought up from the sea to contain an outsize pearl. Mr.

Mahomed's father was offered four hundred pounds for it, but refused to sell. But when the blister was opened it was found to be hollow. . . .

But to balance this sad story we were shown another shell on which a large blister had been removed; this one had contained a pearl which was sold for twenty thousand rupees—about fifteen hundred pounds.

Suspended from an upper window of this house was what at first glance appeared to be a large brown mat round which a number of bees were flying. Closer inspection revealed it as a cluster of bees. Mr. Mahomed said, smiling, that he was not disturbed by the presence of the swarm.

"We believe they bring us good fortune," he said, "so we let them *be*. . . ."

2

I wanted to see the Club, where in the old days of empire the miners and planters gathered to drink chota-pegs at sundown, be as offensive as they chose about 'the natives', and scandalous about each other. George Orwell, in his novel, *Burmese Days*, published in 1935, presented a vivid picture of the sort of thing, drawn from the life. Yet, oddly, in spite of its manifest aversion to imperialism and colour-bar Burmans do not care for the book, because, they say, though the white people are shown up the Burmans do not come out well either. The book has documentary value, nevertheless.

The Club was completely empty when Leigh Elsum and Ma Pyo and I entered it—even the Indian 'butler' had to be summoned from somewhere out of the night. There was a desolation about the place, as though it had not been used for years, though it is, in fact, well used during the day, I gathered. Imagination had to work hard to fill the shabby wicker arm-chairs placed round low tables littered with copies of English magazines and newspapers and reconstruct the scene as set forth by Orwell, and subtly evoked by Somerset Maugham in his Malayan stories. Maugham, I was told in Rangoon, by an Englishman from Singapore, has never been forgiven in Malaya. It was a pity Orwell never lived to see Burma in

independence. But then it was altogether a pity that Orwell died when he did.

On the way back from the market next morning Ma Pyo and I called on some English planters in their pleasant houses. With one of them at eight o'clock in the morning I drank iced beer, but when you have been up since five-thirty or so beer at eight is not as early as it sounds. Certainly by then the day is beginning to be hot. In each house Ma Pyo was greeted no less cordially than myself. The world has moved on—at least in the East—since George Orwell's Burmese days, and the native peoples of Burma, India, Ceylon, Indonesia, meet the white foreigners who are no longer their rulers on terms of social equality. And that they do meet them, and even form friendships with them, speaks well for their capacity for forgiveness. But where the whites are concerned, below the surface cordiality and the acceptance of the new order, there is still in many—and in many Anglo-Burmans—a nostalgia for 'the good old days' of white supremacy, and the feeling that the country has 'come down' now that the Union Jack flies only over the embassies and consulates; for them the present rulers of the country are usurpers and upstarts. They themselves no longer 'belong'. One said of their present existence that it was 'the last chukka'. Yet most of them have been there so long that they would belong even less in England now, where neither the climate nor the lack of servants would suit them. In England, too, a new order prevails.

I am not here thinking of men like Leigh Elsum who have married women of the country and raised up children by them, and thus become themselves part of the country, and who are sympathetic to the new regime, but of the pukka sahibs who are sahibs no longer, and in whose pukka status no one is interested. They are anachronisms and they know it; it is sad for them, but their sun has set, and a new sun rises on a new world.

3

In the East to rise with the sun is not difficult. Indeed, it seems most natural; and those hours before nine o'clock are the best of the day. Only then is it cool. In the evenings though the

sun has gone the buildings and the earth give back the heat of the day. To go to a market at eight o'clock is already late. By six-thirty it is already teeming with life. The women sit on the ground behind their wares—fruits, vegetables, chillies, fish, rice, spices, sweets, spread out before them on bamboo mats or heaped in shallow baskets. Throughout Burma women are the chief small traders and the markets are almost entirely in their hands. The colours of the fruits and vegetables in the Mergui market are brilliant—the scarlet of chillies, the harsh greens of gourds, the bright red of the huge water melons cut open to show their sugar-sweet insides, the golden glow of chubby little bananas no longer than a thumb, the purple of brinjals. And there are flowers of all kinds, red lilies, mauve, white and pink asters, delicate pink, white and red cosmos—both popular for pagodas; leaves in which to wrap *pan*. There is fresh fish and dried fish. *Salone* (sea-gipsy) women sit opening oysters and cockles and throwing the shells on to the narrow dried-mud paths in front of them. The pariah dogs prowl and prowl around. There are planks across dry gutters between paths, and the dogs prowl there hopeful of edible refuse. Women sit behind their wares eating their breakfasts out of tin 'tiffin-carriers' like old-style milkcans. Others are busy frying thin pancakes of rice flour which can be bought and eaten on the spot or taken away wrapped in a piece of banana leaf.

Flowers are sold complete with their roots and are always bundled up into strips of banana leaf. If you buy a chicken you buy it alive; awaiting purchase they lie on the ground in bunches, their legs tied together. Many of the Burmese women shopping in the market have Indian women in attendance, walking behind them, baskets on their heads, to carry home the purchases. No Burmese woman of any standing would dream of carrying home her own shopping. In the kitchen she probably has a Moslem cook.

If Indian labour were to dry up—and it is much less than before the war—who would slaughter the cattle, the ducks, the chickens, which the Burmans like to eat? Who would empty the commodes? Who would do such street-scavenging as is done? Who would destroy the pariah dogs during the outbreaks of rabies? Perhaps the problem would be overcome by the

development of a new class of despised people, such as the fishermen are.

Many of the Indians in present-day Burma, of course, were born there, and they often take Burmese names and wear Burmese dress. Judging by the crowds at the exit-permit office in Rangoon there is a great desire on the part of these Burmese Indians to visit the mother country. If I seem over-exercised about the Indian workers in Burma it is because it seems so sad a thing that this ancient people, so desperately poor, in the mass, in its own country, must be the sweepers, the labourers, the menials, in a neighbouring country—the more so in that they are in no sense an inferior people. In Mergui I was told that the Indian labourers can earn up to ten *kyats* a day—about fifteen shillings—along the waterfront, but it is all casual labour. Some of them have bullock-carts and do haulage work. On the rubber estates they get three rupees a day—about five shillings—with free housing and cheap rice. This is considered good pay. Fortunately they have few requirements.

There have been from time to time anti-Indian riots in Burma. The decade between 1930 and 1940 saw several. They flare up out of very little, because of ancient grudges always smouldering just below the surface in the Burmese mind. The one in 1938 in which hundreds of people were killed,¹ mostly Indians, was because of the publication of a book by a Burman Moslem which the Buddhists considered insulted their religion. There were attacks on Indian shops, and an Indian-owned cotton mill was burned down. Dislike of the Indians is deep-rooted. In the past they were with the British and the Chinese the exploiters of the country, industrially and agriculturally. They were also the money-lenders, and they got a stranglehold on the peasantry. When the crops were bad the paddy farmers borrowed from the Indian usurers at enormously high rates of interest, mortgaging their lands to them and very often losing them to them. Justice Douglas records² that by 1941 sixty per cent of all the agricultural land in Burma was owned by landlords, their largest holdings being in the delta, where more than half

¹ The official figure was 240, but it is believed that the actual figure was well over a thousand Indians alone.

² In *North from Malaya* (Gollancz), 1945.

the land was in the hands of absentee landlords; in some areas of the delta as much as eighty per cent of the land was so owned. Moreover, the Burmese farm tenants—who were formerly the owners of the land—‘were under new pressure from Indian immigrants, who with their lower standard of living were willing to pay higher rents for agricultural land than the Burmese. Rents rose, evictions for defaults increased, the number of migrating tenants grew. Burma became more and more a nation of landless labourers who had no roots. . . .’

So that the anti-Indian prejudice is understandable, though it has no justification at the present day, for in the new Constitution ‘the State is the ultimate owner of all lands’. Land has been confiscated and redistributed where it was thought necessary. Old holdings have been cut down to fifty acres, and new ones limited to twelve. And the Burmese rural population has been liberated from the stranglehold of the Indian money-lenders—most of whom have left the country. There are plenty of prosperous Indian traders in the country, however, and this business acumen is a reminder—just below the surface of consciousness—of the ancient wrongs.

The nearest island across the blue water from Mergui is Pataw-Patit, a thickly wooded hill which rises to about sixteen hundred feet and is crowned by a pagoda and monastery. We went out to it in a Government launch, but close in to the shore the water becomes so shallow that the rest of the journey had to be made in a ‘dugout’—a long light narrow boat with a curved prow and propelled by a man standing in the stern with a single scull. We stepped ashore on a rocky shingly beach and were immediately confronted by a Hindu altar. Steps led up to it, but the altar itself was contrived out of a single huge boulder. Here the Mergui Hindus, lacking a temple, come to make *puja* to the monkey god. There are a number of monkeys on the island and they congregate round the shrine, where the Hindus feed them with corn cobs and bananas. A coconut is broken on the altar and the milk poured over it. There are wilting flowers and guttering candles; men in *dhotis* and women in *saris*, with flowers in their hair, and little children with enormous dark eyes and wearing only a charm attached to a

string round their necks or waists; men, women and children, with their sad beautiful Indian faces, the Hindus of Mergui. They come out in sampans from the mainland, bringing food, and spending the whole day on the 'monkey island'. Perhaps it was because we went ashore in the company of an Indian woman wearing a *sari* that they smiled and made gestures of friendliness and invited us to eat with them in the shelter at the top of the steps. They are to have a temple, it seems; the money has been raised; the foundations, even, laid.

When we left the island I felt a sadness into which several things entered; one of them was nostalgia.

4

Down by the seafront in Mergui there is a curious little Festival-of-Britain ornamental pergola pointed out to visitors as a memorial to Mary White, wife of Samuel White—one of England's seventeenth-century glorified pirates. And thereby hangs a considerable tale. In 1917 Mr. J. S. Furnival, then in the Mergui administration,¹ noticed a washerman pounding clothes on a slab upon which there was a partly defaced inscription in English. He made out from this inscription that the slab was the gravestone of Mary White, and he had it set up under an old banyan tree opposite the landing jetty. It was the discovery of this stone by his predecessor in office which inspired Maurice Collis to write *Siamese White*,² the biography of the astonishing Samuel. When White arrived in Mergui in 1677 it was a Siamese port, and White got himself promoted to the mandarinat and made Shahbandar, or port officer, which enabled him to develop bigger and better piracy. As Norman Lewis observes in his book³ in this connection, 'The difference between common piracy and empire-building is a matter of scale and success. If White could have held on to Mergui and facilitated its annexation to the British crown he would have been an empire builder, but, as it was, his enterprise failed; although by robbing all who fell into his clutches he put

¹ Now adviser to the present government.

² Faber & Faber, 1936.

³ *Golden Earth*.

by enough to enable himself to set up as a squire when he finally reached home.¹

Neither banyan tree nor stone are now to be found by the landing jetty. The tree died and was in due course removed, and when Burma achieved independence the stone for some reason was also removed and the present bird-cage affair erected.

On the ridge which rises behind the town stands a large chalet-like house, wooden outside and in, looking out over the panorama of hills and islands, and the little town which from a distance seems almost submerged in trees; this is the Circuit House, reputedly haunted by the ghosts of English seamen massacred by the Siamese—the massacre from which White himself escaped. Mr. Collis records in his book, *Into Hidden Burma*, some supernatural experiences in connection with this in his own house on the ridge.¹

5

In Mergui I attended my first Burmese wedding. In Burma, it should be understood, a wedding is neither a civil nor a religious affair. Two people setting up house together and declaring themselves, openly, to be married, are married; and if they separate they are divorced. If one of the two does not wish to be divorced the matter is taken to court—which for that purpose is more in the nature of a marriage advice bureau than a court of law. Only if any property is involved does law come into it, and in this matter of property Burmese women, unlike Indian women, are well protected and on terms of equality with men. The present government is encouraging the registration of marriages so that property disputes may be more easily settled in the event of the marriage being broken up. If the marriage is not registered a man may dispute that he was ever married to the woman claiming certain property rights from him, that his relationship with her was not a marriage. Such cases have been known.

But even without registration if the marriage is solemnized formally in the presence of some responsible elder—the head

¹ Burnt down during the Japanese invasion and a new house built on the site.

man of a village, or a schoolmaster, or a respected elderly uncle—with the friends and relatives of both parties assembled, there can be no disputing that it was contracted. But despite the general informality it is in human nature to wish to make some sort of celebration of so important an event as the uniting of two lives in a bond of love. And the Burmese are a naturally gay people, who welcome any excuse for a festive occasion.

Most marriages, therefore, in all classes, are a family-and-friends party occasion, as in the West, but much more comprehensive, for the guests seem to take in the entire neighbourhood and the festivity to last all day and night. And everyone must be fed; well-fed at that. Food is an important part of Burmese festivals.

You can always tell at which house a wedding is being celebrated by all the coloured paper streamers outside, and, usually, because of the music relayed by loud-speaker. Inside the house the male guests will be found feasting, on the ground floor if it is a two-storey house, and the women and children seated on the floor above. The men sit eating and the women, awaiting their turn, sit fluttering their fans and talking, whilst the bride is being arrayed and her hair dressed in the traditional manner—a process which apparently takes hours. The women all wear their best silk *longyi*s, with long-sleeved *eingyi*s, gauze scarves, a great deal of jewellery, and flowers in their hair—roses, jasmine, frangipani, and artificial flowers, sometimes both real and artificial mixed. Many of the older women dress their hair in the court style, coiled high on top of their heads. The children, both boys and girls, are rouged and lipsticked. Presently, after perhaps about an hour or more, the men begin to troop in. On this occasion they sat together behind a barricade formed by great silver urns full of the money the bridegroom had brought to the wedding—several hundred pounds, I was assured—and a heap of fruit like a harvest festival offering. In the middle of the room, in front of the urns and the mound of fruit, were placed two square cushions covered with golden silk and lace, and in front of the cushions two small pillows, similarly covered. A formal cone-shaped posy of mixed flowers was placed on each pillow. The bridegroom entered first and took his place on the right-hand cushion. He was immaculate in a snowy linen *eingyi*, golden silk *longyi*, and crisp white

organdie *gaungbaung*, the characteristic Burmese turban, a round cap which fits close to the head, with a stiff bow at the right-hand side. It is worn on all formal occasions. The groom was accompanied by young men attendants, similarly though rather less grandly attired. An elderly man had for some time been reciting from the scriptures, though no one paid much attention. At intervals he called the bridegroom, and when the young man had taken his place on the cushion he called the bride. Meanwhile the women took a good deal of interest in the European in their midst. My companion said presently, "They want to know how old you are." I replied, "Ask them how old they think." The answer came back, "They think you are over forty." That was fair enough. "Tell them over fifty," I said. In Burma there is great candour about age; fortunately it is respected, but unfortunately, from the Western point of view, over forty is old. In Mandalay a young man said to me, "We all think you are wonderful to be travelling about Burma like this all by yourself in your old age. . . ." I was in a party once with a quite presentable Burmese woman in, I suppose, her middle forties, and a young man glancing at her, appraisingly, turned to his companion and inquired, "Who is the old lady?" But to return to the wedding, for the bride is surely here by now. . . .

She came at last, after she had been called several times, and she was worth waiting for. She looked like something out of an Oriental fairy-tale. She wore a yellow silk *longyi* and long sleeved gauzy *eingyi*, with a gauzy scarf. She was heavily jewelled, with several strings of pearls, a gold necklace with diamonds, and a ring on each finger of each hand. Her hair was elaborately dressed, in the traditional bridal fashion, coiled high on top, with a tress hanging down her right cheek on to her shoulder. She had Chinese blood, and was slender, small and flower-like. Her groom was unusually tall for a Burman, and of finer features than most. He was extremely handsome. Bride and groom took up the posies from the silk pillows and held them between their two hands clasped as for prayer whilst the Master of Ceremonies continued to recite Buddhist blessings. Suddenly the recitation finished, and they were married. There was a scattering of rice, followed by a shower of small coins for which the children scrambled.

There was a general movement, into the next room and downstairs, though a number of the women remained seated on the floor, fanning themselves and chatting.

In the adjoining room the young couple sat on chairs at the foot of the bridal bed, surrounded by a group of male guests, who sat smoking and talking. People came and went, to greet the young couple and to admire the bed—a custom common in the East. This bridal bed was covered with yellow silk and lace, with bolsters and pillows to match. Even the mosquito net was golden, and the supporting pillars were decorated with tinsel and pink paper flowers. Garlands of coloured paper stretched across the room. The beautiful young couple sat at the foot of their bed silent and impassive, as though they would bear with it all, gravely and patiently, for as long as might be required of them.

In the next room gifts were stacked in a corner from floor to ceiling, and another lorry load arrived just as I left the house.

This was a well-to-do wedding. I attended a wedding of humble people—the bridegroom was a clerk—when I got back to Rangoon. At this wedding the men and women sat together on the floor, and each guest was presented with an enormous cheroot with a tassel of white flowers dangling from one end. Here, instead of relayed gramophone records of Westernized Burmese music, there was a band consisting of pipes and an accordion which played straight American music—which Burmese youth much prefers, unfortunately, to its own music.

Here all was much more informal. Whilst the reciting was going on—a schoolmaster officiated this time—two youths were busy fixing up an electric light bulb, one standing on a chair in the midst of the guests whilst the other trailed the flex across the room to some farther point, and women moved about among the guests with plates of food. The bride and groom sat on silk cushions in front of silver bowls, and there was the mound of fruit. When the reciting was concluded the young couple placed their right hands together in a bowl of water, there was a scattering of coins and rice, emblems of wealth and fertility, and they were married.

(VII)

THE FAR NORTH: BHAMO

I HAD an introduction to the Chief Conservator of Forests in Burma, U Kyaw Khine, from my old friend of the Indian jungles, Shri M. D. Chaturvedi. I had hoped to be able to tour the Burmese forests and jungles in the way that my daughter and I had toured those of India. Before I left London, however, 'Chats' had written warning me that this would almost certainly prove impractical, as insurgents were making it difficult for forest officers to carry out their tours, and the forest rest-houses were closed. In Rangoon U Kyaw Khine confirmed this. But, it seemed, it might be possible for me to go to Bhamo—some two hundred miles north of Mandalay, forty miles west of the Chinese border, on the trade route to Yunnan. He would arrange for the Divisional Forest Officer there to look after me. If I had a fortnight to spare I could go all the way by boat. Or I could fly there in about three and a half hours. I said I would fly.

I left Themis Court at four-thirty in the morning to be on the airfield at five. It was not yet light, but at the refugee huts all along the road past the Shwe Dagon, still floodlit against the paling sky, people were cooking over roadside fires, *pongys* were already starting out on their rounds, their orange robes wrapped tightly round them against the morning coolness, and at a café some men sat cross-legged on a low dais playing by candlelight what appeared to be some sort of dice game.

But at Mingaladon airfield various of the staff still slept on wooden benches, and intending passengers, including myself, were like so many somnambulists.

The one man left awake asked us each in turn what was our 'personal weight', and took our word for it, and before we had all answered it was daylight, in the sudden Eastern way.

I was the only woman on the 'plane. My fellow passengers

were of a curiously villainous appearance, but were mild enough in manner. Some looked Chinese—and probably were—with the traditional long down-drooping moustaches; some had long hair done in top-knots; one wore a grimy towel for a turban. The 'plane was like an oven. Through the dirty windows it was just possible to see hilly and thickly wooded country over which the grape-bloom coloured wild creeper spread a soft veil. We flew up valleys where at times the wings of the 'plane were on a level with the hill-tops.

We arrived at about nine-thirty, when the day was beginning to warm up. A number of people were gathered to meet the lone Englishwoman—the Deputy Commissioner, the Divisional Forestry Officer, the Inspector of Police, an Indian forest-officer, a group of women representing some Buddhist religious organization, and others about whom I was confused. Someone said, "You will have the Circuit House all to yourself."

"Fine," I said. Perhaps a little defiantly, remembering that all Circuit Houses were reputedly haunted. . . .

The Bhamo Circuit House is large and dark and as bleak as most of its kind. It stands in the middle of an arid compound, and being half-timbered has a curiously English suburban look. But the English look is purely external. The wooden rooms contain a bed, a table, a chair, and a wire line across the middle of the room. Opening out of each barnlike room there is a dark cement-floored bathroom containing a zinc bath full of water, jugs, a washbasin, and a commode. A sweeper's entrance connects with each bathroom. The drill is to bolt the sweeper's entrance when using the room and unbolt it on leaving, so that he may come up and perform his unpleasant service. The sweeper was an old turbanned Indian, who had an uncanny knack of coming up the stairs as soon as the door at the top was unbolted. A number of holes in the wooden walls had been stopped up with paper, I noticed. . . . The water one pours over oneself streams away across the floor into a guttering, down a pipe, and empties itself into an open drain in the yard below—to the delight of the children who play there. In this yard there is a cook-house and adjoining the cook-house a roofed-over space where men sit and drink tea at all hours.

Downstairs there is a huge desolate dining-room like a



Market at village on Inle Lake, Shan States



Market at Bhamo, Upper Burma



Meditation Centre, near Mandalay

drill-hall, presided over by a big fat dark-skinned 'butler'. He waddled about heavily in his check *longyi* and slippered feet, his manner and expression sombre, as though the combination of the heat and the arrival of the solitary visitor, English and female at that, depressed him. Young children peeped shyly round a door at the far end of the room, and I had glimpsed a youngish woman in the cook-house beyond. I wondered if they were his family, and if he was less morose and overpowering in their presence. He served me almost immediately on my arrival with a huge meal of eggs and bacon and sausages and tomatoes and fried mashed potato and tea, at the far end of the long table, all good and hot and greasy. All else apart, one would have had to have been extremely hungry to have had appetite for so much food massed on to one plate. I separated one of the eggs on to another plate and ate it with a piece of toast and hoped that the rejection of the rest would not be regarded as any reflection on the cooking, so gallantly English-style, and, indeed, of its kind admirable.

A few hours later there was another huge meal, beginning with a large plate of greasy soup, followed by a great mound of rice and slabs of fried meat, with some salad leaves in a glass of water. When he removed the greater part of it all untouched I wondered whether the look on the butler's face was reproach or contempt; perhaps it was merely bewilderment. I tried to explain that though the food was very good I could not eat such quantities in the heat of the day, but his English was very limited and we had no Esperanto of mutual liking to help us out.

I retired to my barn of a room with the guilty feeling of a small girl who has not made a very good start at a new school. I unpacked a little and hung a few garments and a towel on the wire line to make the bleak room look more lived-in.

Between the two meals the Deputy Commissioner had come in with various other people and we had all sat round in the bleak sitting-room to discuss a 'program'. What did I want to do? I countered with the inquiry as to what there was to do. Was I interested to see villages? Yes, I was, particularly if there were any Mass Education villages. I was very interested in Mass Education, I said. And, I insisted, I wanted to see the forests. That, said the D.C., was for the D.F.O. He would return in the afternoon with his wife and take me to the village

of Myothit, which means new town. Tomorrow the D.F.O. was arranging for me to visit a lumber camp. The day after we would visit a Shan Burmese Mass Education village called Mantha. Tomorrow afternoon, when I got back from the lumber camp, it would be appreciated if I would give a talk.

"Up here we feel very cut off. We do not often get a chance to hear a lecture, and when someone comes from outside we feel it is an opportunity for us to gain some education."

I sighed. This Eastern passion for Western 'culture'. It was India all over again.

"What would you like me to talk about?" I inquired.

"Your travels."

"But where? I have been all over India, all over Russia——"

"It would be very interesting to us to hear about Russia. With Red China so close we cannot help being interested in Russia."

I pointed out that I knew nothing at first hand of Russia today. That I had not been in the Soviet Union since 1935.

"We should be interested to know about pre-war Russia."

So it remained only to settle the time. They suggested three—I would be back from the forests by mid-day. I protested at giving a talk when the day was at its hottest. Four, then, they said. Six o'clock, I said. It was like bargaining a price in a market. At six people have their evening meal, they said. We settled for five.

Bhamo is a 'Chinese town'. Above the open-fronted shops almost every name is Chinese. There is not very much to it. There is a main street, and another street, and a few side streets, all deep in dust, and that is about all. But there is very little refuse in the streets, and not many pariah dogs. And it is surrounded by scenery of quite incredible beauty. I wrote in my notes at the time, 'This is the most beautiful scenery I have ever seen. It is like Chitagahr, in India, but even more beautiful.' Perhaps it is not more beautiful than that between Lashio and Mandalay, and that which surrounds Taunggyi and Kalaw in the Southern Shans, none of which I had then seen. The whole area is one of range upon range of hills and of deep broad valleys and roads climbing in endless zigzags above them, the views seeming to grow more beautiful at every turn.

The road out to Myothit climbs for some time above the valley where the river winds with wooded hills on the far side—and China five miles as the crow flies beyond those hills. There are indications of the frontier along the road. The nearest we approached to China by road was seventeen miles. How beautiful the giant ferns of the living bamboo curtain between us and that forbidden, fabulous, and controversial land! And how impossible not to speculate. How artificial are the political frontiers—at the eighteenth mile the scenery, the vegetation, and the people, will be the same.

The beautiful mauve creeper is everywhere on the bushes and trees when the road drives through jungle. The flower of this creeper is three-petalled and soft as suede, the petals with light undersides. It is beautiful to the touch, but has no scent. A purple blossom like small orchids grows on leafless trees, and there is a dark reddish-purplish blossom which hangs in clusters like bunches of small orchids or black grapes; it is fascinatingly beautiful, the quintessence of tropical blossom, but it is not to be touched; its juice is acid and stings the hands. There are hedges of tall straight cactus, like thick green palings, sometimes at the sides of the paddy fields, sometimes partially fencing the compounds of the bamboo houses. People sit on mats on the wooden verandahs of the houses; occasionally in a shabby deck chair, or on a hard chair, but more often on a mat on the floor of the verandah, just inside the room opening on to it. The houses are on piles; at nights the cattle are brought in from the hills and shelter underneath; sometimes they are enclosed under the house by a bamboo fencing, but more often there is no such fencing. Occasionally the road runs through teak plantations; the big round leaves of the tall trees drop to the ground in the heat. We pass women wearing the big high-pointed Shan hats; some of them carry panniers across their shoulders, and often a child on their backs as well. Among my Bhamo notes I find, 'The Shan Burmans are very clean people and given to cultivating the gardens round their houses. But the Kachins are dirty and lazy and smoke opium and can't be bothered.' The Kachins—properly Jinghpaws—are hill people who have settled in the Bhamo district and the Northern Shan States. They wear bright red and black clothes, decked with coins, and have a gipsyish look. The generalization set down

in my notes was what I found commonly said of them, but upon investigation proved to be as unfair as most generalizations. They are not in the least lazy—if they were they would not be able to survive among their infertile hills; they have to work from dawn to dusk during the paddy season. A Catholic priest who has lived many years among them told me that as labourers they prove hard and willing workers and content with small wages. An organized effort is being made to improve their lot. A factory for the production of sugar from the locally grown cane has been started both at Bhamo and in Myitykina; these enterprises will enable the Kachins to earn a little more. Efforts are also being made to encourage coffee-growing, which is successful in the cooler climate of the hills.

As to their 'dirtiness', said the priest, their ideas of hygiene "are not more backward than those of Europe a hundred years ago". And these ideas are improving with the setting up of small hospitals and the training of health-officers to instruct and advise the people. Some of the Kachins engage in the opium trade along the Chinese border, "but they smoke very little compared with some of the other races". For one thing opium is expensive, and the Kachins are poor.

They practise 'shifting cultivation', which is generally denounced as wasteful, particularly by forest-officers, though agriculturally it is not in fact as wasteful as it may superficially appear. Each family selects an area of the jungle in the hills each year, and in March and April clears it by cutting down and burning off. At nights during that time the hills are dotted with the red glow of fires—as in Ireland, during the month of May, when the gorse is burnt off. During the day there is a haze of smoke drifting over the hills, and any village near a fire finds ash borne on the breeze. Very stringent regulations attach to this burning-off, as to how and when it is to be done, and heavy fines are imposed for any violation of the regulations. During the heavy rains of June and July the young rice plants are transplanted, and in October and November the harvest is reaped. The ash from the burning serves as fertilizer, but it is insufficient, so that a new site has to be found for next year's crop. But the burnt-off land reverts to jungle very quickly, so that there is no danger of soil-erosion, such as occurs in China where the pressure of a vast population makes more intensive

cultivation necessary, and the soil is exhausted and the hills after a time become barren.

So much for the maligned but hard-working Kachins. But it is apparently true to say of the men who work in the river tying the great teak logs to the bamboo rafts to be floated down the river to Mandalay that they take opium. The D.F.O. told me, "They say that they could not endure the work they do, standing all day in the water, with the sun beating down on their heads, without it." The chief users of opium are the Chinese, but the number of shops licensed for its sale is declining. The population of Bhamo is about 10,000, of whom between 2500 and 3000 are Chinese.

The village of Myothit is proud of its new large modern school—there was none previously—and its six-bed hospital. The people work in the paddy fields, very often for goods in kind, mostly baskets of rice. Sometimes the fields are communally owned by the tribes. Government-sponsored co-operatives buy the paddy at prices fixed by the State Agricultural Marketing Board (SAMB), which takes over the paddy and has it milled at the rate it has fixed, and then exports the rice. The Government—through SAMB—has the sole monopoly of the export of rice, which is its biggest source of revenue—it is freely admitted that for each ton of rice exported SAMB gets many times more than it pays the cultivator and miller combined. The millers, although they complain bitterly of the reduction of their profits under this arrangement, nevertheless come out best, for the grower must even pay to have the paddy he needs for his own use milled.

On the road back to Bhamo we ran into droves of buffalo, humped-back bullocks, and thin cows, being driven in from the hills for the night. In some places pigs and cattle still grazed the harvested paddy fields. I inquired about wild beasts. Tigers, no, but an occasional panther came down from the hills. I looked apprehensively at the rapidly sinking sun—no tigers this trip, but haunted circuit houses. And night, we know, must fall. . . .

There was a postponement of the ghostly rendezvous, however, in the shape of a note from the D.F.O. saying that he would call to take me to dinner at his house.

This he did, and it proved to be a very pleasant occasion; but I was back at the bleak barn of the Circuit House by nine-thirty. No lights showed anywhere in it. The butler heard the car arrive and emerged from the rear quarters carrying a large storm lamp with a mantle and a loudly hissing white flame. On a bare table in the entrance hall a single-burner oil lamp gave a feeble light almost quenched by the incandescent glare. The butler took this small lamp in one hand and in the other held the storm-lamp aloft, and I gathered up my long skirt and followed him up the dark staircase.

The butler set the lamp down on the table and weird shadows peopled the great bare room. He wore a towel round his shoulders, like a shawl. He regarded me sombrely.

"Breakfast. What time?"

"Seven o'clock," I said. I was to leave for the lumber camp at seven-thirty. Then, remembering the morning's enormous greasy meal, "*Chota-hazri*," I added. "Coffee, toast. No more."

He nodded. "Downstairs," he said.

"No. Here," I said, firmly.

Then, as he seemed to hesitate, "Good night," I said.

He turned and waddled out, not answering. I bolted the door after him. I bolted the door on to the verandah. Then I picked up the hissing lamp and opened the door of the bathroom and peeped in, telling myself that there would be cockroaches for certain. But the white glare revealed nothing. I bolted the door on to the sweeper's stairs. Then I came back into the big room and put the lamp on the table, sat down on the chair, and gazed fearfully round. I had the feeling of being locked in a great barn. Presently, no doubt, there would be the scurry of rats under the floor-boards, or along the high rafters under the vaulted wooden roof. I shivered. The nights were cold, surely, after the burning days.

I took off my black velvet stole and hung it on the line. The rhinestones glittered in the circle of light. It made the barn look a little more furnished, I thought, the way a glittering memory will furnish the lonely places of the mind. The last time I had worn the long skirt and the stole had been at the party given for me at the British Embassy on my second night in Rangoon. It had been held in the garden. There had been lights hung in the trees, and there had been champagne. It had

been His Excellency's birthday. There had been a cake and candles, and Mrs. Gore-Booth had organized the Europeans of the party to sing, when the cake was cut, 'Happy birthday to you.' If there are any more words no one seemed to know them, but those few we sang heartily enough. The Burmans stood and smiled. They could not be expected to know our quaint old English customs. Gay, they looked, the men in their best silk *pases*, their braided *eingyis*, their neat turbans with the jaunty bow at the side, their ladies like beautiful butterflies in their bright coloured silk *longyis*. The Burmese ladies covered up their arms for the occasion, and the European ladies bared them; but they too were graceful in their long dresses, and the white dinner jacket of the tropics makes the European male look less like a penguin than he does at home in evening dress. The Burmans drank their soft drinks and the Westerners drank their champagne and their whiskies and their cocktails, and the night was warm and full of the scent of flowers, and no ghosts walked.

How dark it was beyond the arc of white light! But it was only, after all, the unlit end of the garden. Here in the centre was light and laughter and the hum of voices and the swish of silks. There at the edge of the light is our guest of honour—that one, there, with the black velvet stole with the rhinestones—you can see them glitter in the shadows. . . .

The place was haunted, all right, but the ghosts were good company.

Presently I carried the lamp over to the bed and set it down on the floor. I got in under the mosquito net and tucked it in securely all round. Then I thrust a hand through between mosquito net and mattress and turned out the hissing lamp, tucking the net in again, carefully. The bed was hard even by Eastern standards. Now that the lamp was out the night was full of the tick-tick-ticking of cicadas. I lay a long time listening to the stillness and staring at the black darkness. I had an oppressive sense of the empty rooms all round and below. The ghosts had gone home, and not even a wall lizard furnished the aloneness.

But surely as night must fall day must come, and fortunately in the East it comes soon.

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The D.F.O. arrived in a jeep punctually at seven-thirty.

"No armed guard?" I asked, smiling, as I got in beside him.

"I am always being urged to take one, but I prefer not to. I always feel it's safer without."

It is always so satisfactory to hear someone express one's own views. The D.F.O. also took no servant or peon with him on the back seat.

There were herds of cattle on the road being driven off to the paddy fields and the hills. They moved in a cloud of dust, and I was reminded of a herd of wild ponies I had seen in a Caucasian village once, galloping out to the steppes, dust rising round them like smoke.

We called in at a timber mill where the wood was being sawn by hand. On a roofed platform a man guided the planks and put in the wedges—skilled work, the D.F.O. said—and a man below held the handle of the saw. They are paid piece-work and earn about three rupees a day for this monotonous work. They are Shans. They stay for about a year, then return to their villages in the Shan States with their earnings. Local labour was useless, said the D.F.O., as the men and boys engaged were always wanting to run back to their villages for funerals and weddings. These Shans were too far from their homes for that. They stayed on the job. They lived in a three-sided bamboo hut furnished solely by a low broad sleeping platform. They cooked on a fire inside the hut, as they say that the smoke is good for the thatch.

We took the jeep as far as it would go into the jungle, then got out and walked. It was a very good feeling to be walking again—really walking, not just paddling round a pagoda, but following a narrow track deeper and deeper into dense forest. Then suddenly there was a clearing, a charcoal fire, a hut, and the great grey hulk of elephants. I had seen elephants in Burma previously only at a saw-mill by the river at Moulmein. There they had used tusked elephants; here they were also male, but tuskless. I asked what happened when they were in *musth*—a glandular discharge from near the ear, during which time the elephant's sexual instinct is at its height, although it mates at other times also. (The elephant is the only male animal to come into 'season'.) The D.F.O. replied that they were chained up with double chains and starved. A fit animal comes into *musth*

annually in the hot weather and may stay in that condition for a fortnight.

Major Leroy Christian¹ quotes the *Report on Forest Administration in Burma* for 1936 to the effect that there were then 6234 domesticated elephants used in the forests, of which 327 were Government owned, and that 'because of their damage to crops, fields, fences, huts, more than one hundred elephants are shot annually by Government game wardens'. He omits to mention whether they are Buddhists or not, and without any apparent irony goes on to observe that 'The Burmese are keen sportsmen, and Burma contains some of the finest shooting in all Asia.'

The Government sells the hardwood of the forests to contractors very cheaply. Teak is the valuable timber, and next to that pyinkado, useful for railway sleepers because it cannot be attacked by white ants.

We continued along the forest track and came to where a contractor had two elephants hauling logs into position for loading on to the waiting lorry. There was the warm grey smell of the great patient, intelligent beasts, and the crash of bamboo as the logs were manœuvred, by trunk and forefeet, into the required position.

We stood watching, with the contractor, and I learned that the Government had abandoned the reforestation plan in favour of encouraging natural growth, but it was debatable as to whether nature could produce as rapidly as man consumed, and as a long-term plan the natural growth policy might not prove economic. It meant, also, that if there was to be no reforestation the forest officers must become little more than forest 'policemen', keeping an eye on people taking wood for fuel from reserved forests, or taking land for cultivation, or to build a house on, where they should not, and people burning the trunks of trees and tapping them for resin, which destroys the tree. (The resin is used for torches, for domestic lighting.) Thus the forest officers tend to feel that they have no scope for real forestry, and the service is not as attractive, therefore, to forestry-minded young men as it once was. There are in any case fewer applications generally—"every young man of any education, however slight, fancies himself as a government official wielding a little power".

¹ In *Burma and the Japanese Invader*.

I felt bound to agree that there did seem to be an inordinate number of young men walking about Burma today with brief cases under their arms and an air of importance which their minor official roles hardly justified, quite a few of those roles being merely clerkships.

Then, too, religion can present a problem to the forestry officer on occasion, in a district where the races and their religious beliefs are so mixed. There was, for example, a banyan tree to be cut down. The Kachins wouldn't do it, because they are animists, and they were afraid of offending the *Nats*. The Hindus wouldn't do it because to them the banyan is sacred. Finally a Christian was found to put the axe to the root, and then the Kachins finished it. "Even the *Nats*," said the D.F.O., "must bow to a Government order!"

We got back from the forests at noon and went to the river to see what happened to the logs when they finally left the forests. The Irrawaddy here lies below low clay-coloured cliffs. There is a little coarse sparse grass, and clumps of grey scrub and thorn. The dust here is so deep that one person walking behind another must keep several yards distance, because every step raises a grey choking cloud. There is completely no shade, and the heat, when the sun is immediately overhead, is unbelievable. The river, then, becomes as colourless as the sky, as though the heat had drained the colour out of both. On both sides of the river there is this clay-coloured burning aridity. Day-long, without shelter from that fierce heat, men stand in the river, their *longyis* tucked up round their thighs, lashing the heavy logs to bamboo rafts. Bamboo huts are erected in the middle of the rafts, and the raftmen live on the rafts as they drift down the river to Rangoon, where the timber is unloaded. There the raftmen break up their huts and sell them as firewood and return north by train.

Perhaps it is not a bad life drifting down the river on a bamboo raft. Some of the finest scenery of the Irrawaddy is on the stretch between Bhamo and Mandalay, with dense forests going down to the water's edge, and range upon range of great hills behind. But perhaps in an opium-eater's dream you do not notice the scenery. . . .

In the night, incredibly, in spite of the bright moonlight there was a heavy shower of rain.

At seven sharp a jeep load of armed police arrived—six including the driver. At seven-thirty I climbed into another jeep beside the D.C. and we set off for the village of Mantha, the escort party sufficiently far ahead for us to be clear of the wake of their dust. On the way out we passed a tank graveyard—rows of rusted tanks, some said Chinese, others Japanese, others again American. The jungle creepers had almost entirely covered some of them—perhaps, even, by now they are completely covered and birds nest in their turrets, so that they are no longer like old abandoned idols, 'lost obscenes' with molten bowels. Now they are buried in the jungle, 'preparing destinies of rust'.

Then for a long time the road ran through jungle, with tangles of bamboo, and the mauve creeper over everything, and the tall teak trees dropping their big sun-dried leaves to the dust. The day was already hot by the time we reached Mantha. There is a broad main street, ankle deep in dust, and houses on stilts at either side, shady with trees. There are about a hundred houses. The people are Shans. Under a wooden-pillared shelter in a square women squatted on the ground preparing rice for the village festival; the rice was being puffed in wooden bowls over charcoal fires. They regarded the two jeep loads of visitors with mild interest and without stopping their work. Only the children swarmed round, frankly curious and amused.

We spent some time in a rest-house, all wood, without and within, which had recently been in the hands of insurgents. There had been shooting and loss of life on both sides.

Presently the school-bell tolled and children, women and girls, began moving through the dust to the school-house, and "Let us go," said the D.C. "They are assembling."

This was a Mass Education village, and the women and girls were pupils of the adult education classes. They were assembling now not for lessons but that the visitors might inspect them along with the school.

But it should be said here that Mass Education is not merely a matter of literacy, though literacy is part of the program. The name is so misleading that even in Burma itself the campaign is popularly assumed to be purely a literacy drive. It might have been better had Burma borrowed from India and called this great drive for better village life 'Basic Education'—though that, perhaps, suggests only a concern for

schooling; whereas in both countries the campaign is vastly more than that. Perhaps it is best summed up as better living by better *doing*, and the development of community spirit. Briefly, Mass Education shows—rather than tells—people how to live more efficiently, and more satisfactorily—physically and spiritually—the lives they have to live. Literacy does come into it, with adult education classes in villages such as this one, in which there were formerly no schools, but it is by no means the most important item on the agenda. Helping people to a knowledge of the three R's can hardly be accounted more important than showing them how to get the best results out of the soil, how most hygienically to organize their necessarily primitive sanitation, how to make roads which will not plunge them ankle-deep in dust in the dry weather or half drown them in mud when the rains come. Mass Education aims at developing civic sense and community spirit, the need for co-operation in village life, and at demonstrating the advantages of the co-operative marketing of produce.

The Mass Education officers, both men and women, who go out to the villages and live there for a time, first do a long course of training at the Mass Education Centre a few miles outside Rangoon. Here there is a farm, with cows, pigs, poultry, also flower and vegetable gardens, and workshops. The applicants for the work are required to serve a novitiate period, during which time it is determined whether they have the essential physical and temperamental qualifications for this form of social welfare work which does, obviously, require special qualities of tact, understanding and selflessness. Sometimes the applicants themselves decide that they are not after all suited to the work, which is as essentially of a vocational character as nursing or school-teaching. They must be willing to go anywhere at any time, and to live under conditions counted hard by urban standards. It is not easy to find the right kind of people, but they are found, though as yet not enough women come forward.

The idea of introducing Mass Education, which had already been introduced into India and China, into Burma was conceived by U Nu shortly after independence, and U Aung Min, Director of Social Affairs, was made Director of the Mass Education Council. I was delighted in a long con-

versation with him to discover that although literacy was a very important part of the M.E. program it was by no means the most important. In the East even more than in the West education is commonly thought of in terms of book-learning, examinations, degrees—the importance attached to degrees in the East is almost pathological. But U Aung Min has no such obsession. Mass Education has a four-point program—the improvement of agricultural methods, the teaching of hygiene and better methods of sanitation, the development of community spirit in place of each for himself, and literacy. Hygiene and sanitation come first; literacy last. The symbols of Mass Education, printed on their text books, are a plough for agriculture, an open book for literacy, a red cross for health and hygiene, and three links of a chain symbolizing community spirit.

In every Mass Education village there is a social centre. Sometimes it is the house of the M.E.O him—or her—self. The M.E.O's house, whilst being structurally like any other village house, must be, obviously, the best kept in the place, inside and out. The function of the M.E.O is to teach by *example*—to *demonstrate* the best way to do things, not theorize concerning them; to encourage the desire for better living and to foster the attempt to achieve it. All improvements are the results of the people's own voluntary efforts. Thus when a new school building is needed the people subscribe the money and build it themselves, just as they subscribe for all else for their common good.

At Mantha the M.E.O was a young man, of sympathetic personality, who was about to move on to another village and be replaced by a young woman.

When we entered the school-house all the children sitting on the floor turned their faces to us, and with their little flat faces, big dark eyes, and fringes of dark hair, they were like so many little Japanese dolls. Behind them sat the women and girls of the adult classes, their ages ranging from fifteen to fifty—'old women', as the latter were called. But as Burmese people in general invariably look younger than they are some of the 'old women' looked not much more than girls when they were asked to step forward for inspection. They seemed a little shy, and small wonder; the girls were inclined to giggle. The children merely stared, impassively. Presently they all stood up

and sang the Mass Education Song, which is of the *genre* of the Union Day Song, but is concerned with all the things that M.E. teaches.

I was shown some of the books in English available to the villages. The first I was handed was entitled *Studies in Success*. Turning to the index I found the following remarkable assortment of studies—Gandhi, Lenin, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, General Aung San, Sun Yat-Sen.

The next book I handled was Dale Carnegie's *Give Yourself a Chance*.

It is to be hoped that as time goes on M.E. officers will be able to offer the writings of Burmese writers—the East speaking with authority to the East. What have these how-to-be-a-success writers of England and America to say to the people of, say, Mantha village? Your-land-and-how-best-to-cultivate-it, your-village-and-how-best-to-live-in-it, would be more to the point. Burmese villagers give themselves a chance when they become literate, acquire a knowledge of hygiene, learn how to repair their roads, learn the meaning of mutual aid. They have their own problems, their own needs, their own remedies, of which the Western success writers—who have probably never set foot in an Eastern village—know nothing. The sun does not rise in the West; it sets there, and, indeed, may be said to have set; whereas in the East it is steadily rising.

In the heat of early afternoon the two jeeps raised their great cloud of dust in a village where the men were already merry on palm toddy in anticipation of the evening's *puw*. When we stopped to inquire the way they crowded round, laughing, and suggested that we should stay with them awhile. They were so gay that this seemed to me a very charming invitation indeed, and greatly to be preferred the sitting on the floor of a bamboo house and becoming a little merry oneself to pushing on through the heat and dust merely to see the place where they were going to be even merrier that night.

But their gaiety was frowned upon. Good Buddhists do not drink intoxicating liquors, and a censorious voice said, contemptuously, "They are all drunk!"

We left the merry-makers to their gaiety and moved off down the wide street with the bamboo houses on each side, and

just outside the village came to a monastery. The monks sat at the windows, shaven heads leaning against the lintels, the orange of their robes dazzling in the sunshine. It was like a huge dove-cot with orange-coloured doves.

The reason for the *pwé* was the unveiling of a monument to a monk who had insisted on earth burial. Workmen were still working on it when we came to it, on rising ground at the side of the road, some way out of the village, and above the wide *maidan* where the *pwé* was being held. Pots of water had been buried with him, to prevent drought caused by this deviation from the rule of cremation for monks. . . .

On the *maidan* a large stage had been erected in readiness for the performers, and under leaf-thatched awnings shelves and trestles awaited the display of goods and eatables. A few women sat on the ground in the shade of an open-fronted hut; a few men wandered about. The long grass was burnt to the colour of straw and the heat rippled over it like shimmering water. A woman emerged from behind a bullock-cart, its shafts upturned, and stood watching us. She wore a Shan hat, and her *longyi* up under her armpits leaving her shoulders bare; she had a drowsy child on her back. She watched us, but her young and rather beautiful oval face was expressionless. 'What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba. . . .' What, indeed. Not that I would weep for her. I wanted only to see her impassive beauty illuminated by a smile. But it waited on sundown and moonrise and the footlights on the peopled stage. Had that old *pongyi* been cremated there would have been one festival the less. Now instead of mourning him they could celebrate.

Walking back to the jeeps we talked about *pongyis*. In this village there were more monks than villagers.

"And they all have to be supported by the people?"

"They like to do it."

"You would not say that they are parasites, living on the backs of the people?"

"That is what the Communists say."

"You would not say that there are too many of them?"

"But for this great celibate population we should be overpopulated like India."

"They are the country's birth-control?"

"Yes, sir."

I started, though it was not the first time I had been called 'sir'. They did, sometimes, disconcertingly, mix their pronouns.

Next morning I went early with the D.F.O. and his wife to the market. One market, it is true, in any country, is very like another, but I am of those who find markets anywhere endlessly fascinating. This market, too, was different from the Mergui one. There were small shops—silk shops and provision shops; and women sitting on the ground making rice-flour pancakes in black cauldrons—like the Irish pot-oven—over wood and charcoal fires on the ground; there were sweet ones, with the delicious toddy-palm treacle, *jaggery*, and savoury ones with a sprinkle of herbs or vegetables. We bought a few and they were handed to us wrapped in a piece of plantain leaf. With my passion for *jaggery* I longed to eat them immediately, but they proved to be tough and stodgy, and so far as I was concerned quite unedible. There were fishermen with fresh-water fish, fresh from the river that morning; and country people bringing in their vegetable produce. There was tobacco from China, and tinned fish from Japan. Women, half hidden as under umbrellas under their Shan hats, squatted behind their wares, babies strapped to their backs or suckling at their breasts. There was a great traffic of people, Kachins, Shans, Chinese, Indians, with a preponderance of women, moving up and down the narrow sun-baked alleyways between the stalls. A few pi-dogs rummaged in the gutters. There was the sudden stench of dried fish; the sudden scent of flowers; a smell of frying; a smell of spices; and always the moving coloured stream of the people in their bright clothes. I did not want to go from there, but there was no more to look at, no more to buy, and the day was beginning to be hot.

We drove back through the dusty little town, and the long day stretched ahead, empty but for tea at the Roman Catholic mission. Returning from the villages the day before we had been hailed by a little man in shorts at the side of the road. He came running when we stopped for him.

"Sure, I'm in luck," he said, as he scrambled in.

I smiled at a familiar inflection in the voice.

"What part of Ireland do you come from?" I asked.

The previous day at my talk in pre-war Russia there had been one European present, a tall young man in a long white linen coat. I had thought he might be a chemist or a doctor. He had come up to me after the lecture, and all Ireland flowed off his lips. He was a priest from the Mission, and his name was Conneally, and he came from Galway. . . . On the peninsula where I live in the County Galway there are no less than three families so named. I almost hugged him—the darlin' man, the darlin' man.

There were other Irish priests at the Mission, it seemed, and wouldn't I come and have tea and meet them? I replied that I would be delighted—and meant it.

It was cool and pleasant at the St. Columban's Mission, and we talked of Ireland, so green, and so far away—remote as Nirvana, only one didn't mention Nirvana at the Mission. Though the fathers were very nice about Buddhism; polite and respectful. Their teaching and mission work is done mostly up in the hills north of Bhamo, among the Kachins. They run a secondary school for boys in Bhamo, also in Myitkyina, though St. Columban's is not really a teaching mission. "We prefer to concentrate on purely missionary activity," Father Conneely told me, "but in this country that is not possible—at least for the present, so we do our best to look after both aspects. In fact," he added, "one of the conditions of my entry was that I teach."

The Mission has opened small, fourth-standard, schools in the hills, some of which are State recognized and supported, and others supported solely by the Mission. Promising pupils from these schools are sent to the secondary school in Bhamo or to the one in Myitkyina—where there is also a convent for girls run by the Columban nuns. The secondary schools are not State recognized or aided, but the students are allowed to enter for State examinations in them, so the Mission takes fees in these schools from all non-Catholics, and from such Catholics as can pay, to help pay the staff.

The Kachins take to Christianity readily, and there are fourteen thousand Catholics in the hill villages, with an average increase of about a thousand a year. So far there has been no Kachin priest, but "we have nine or ten boys doing their secondary education in preparation for the priesthood".

Missionary work is also done among the Shans, but Father

Conneally admitted that there progress was slower, "as the Shans are Buddhists." But there were, he said, "two thriving Shan communities".

The American Baptists lead in the Christian field in Burma. "The Americans got here first," being the simple explanation. The 1931 Census Report recorded them as accounting for sixty-four per cent of the 331,106 Christians in Burma, and Roman Catholics accounting for twenty-seven per cent. Seven per cent were Anglicans, the remaining two per cent divided among other sects.

The Circuit House seemed lonelier and more desolate than ever at sundown after the Irish friendliness of the St. Columban's Mission. But I had been told that a Special Branch police officer and his assistant were arriving, so at least, I thought, in my Western simplicity, there would be company for the evening meal in the drill-hall of a dining-room. That would be something.

But that was where I was mistaken. In a country where even husbands and wives do not commonly sit down to table together it was hardly to be expected that two Burmans would sit at table with a woman who was a total stranger. I should have known better, and when I had been longer in the country after several times in cafés and restaurants sitting down next to a man and finding he got up and moved to another seat, I did know better. (In a 'bus a man would not dream of sitting down next to a woman. If there is no other seat he would stand, rather. And once, when I moved up in the front seat of a jeep to make room for one of the passengers crowded in behind, the woman I invited refused—rather than sit next the driver, not because he was a driver but because he was a man.) So all that happened the night there were other guests at the Bhamo Circuit House was that I was given my meal in my room, and earlier, and by seven-thirty found myself sitting forlornly alone with the hissing lamp and the haunted shadows.

Outside, the empty compound, the white road, the little pagoda among the trees, the long lines of the hills, the watershed between the Kachin State and the Shan States—were daylight-clear in the tremendous flood-lighting of the full moon.

With nothing else to do I wrote two letters to Rangoon, neither of which ever arrived.

(VIII)

THE ANCIENT CAPITAL: MANDALAY

THE moment I stepped out of the 'plane on to the brown grass of the airfield I realized that the Mandalay heat was different. It did not cling like the damp heat of Rangoon, or burn like the bright heat of the deep south and the far north; it was a curiously suffocating heat, a heat in which it was difficult to breathe; a heat thick and heavy with dust. It was late afternoon when I arrived and there seemed to be a reddish haze over the airfield and the distant hills, not a sunset glow, but something thrown up from the hot dusty earth—heat made tangible, it seemed.

There was no one to meet me. The Attorney General had written to his old friend, Siri Sithu U Ba Maung, bank agent—and late Inspector-General of Police and Prisons—saying that he would be glad if I could stay with him whilst in Mandalay, because at his house he was confident I would meet 'the cream of Buddhist intellectual society'. This letter took a week to arrive, but on receipt of it U Ba Maung wrote that he would be delighted to have me but that the date suggested would not be convenient as he had a venerable *sayadaw* staying in his only spare room. To this letter he had received no reply—it came eventually, having been ten days in transit. Having had no reply to his letter U Ba Maung had assumed that some other arrangement had been made for me. I telephoned him and in about half an hour he arrived in a large and handsome car.

He proved to be elderly, and his manner one of great kindness. He was much exercised as to what to arrange for me. Perhaps I could share a room with his wife and he could put up a bed in the room of his old mother. I said that I could not disturb his domestic arrangements like that, and I had another address in Mandalay—a very nice young Burman whom I had met in Rangoon with Mr. David Maurice had very kindly

invited me to stay with him and his wife when I came to Mandalay; I had, indeed, accepted the invitation, but the Attorney General had been very anxious that I should stay with his old friend and I had cancelled this arrangement. But no doubt I could still go there.

U Ba Maung was still troubled. "At my house it would have been ideal for you—the situation of the house, on the moat, and then every Sunday the discussion group meets there."

"I need only sleep at this other address," I urged. "I can still meet all these people, and when it is convenient move into your house."

U Ba Maung inquired the address of this other place. When I told him he exclaimed, dismayed, "But that is in Chinatown!"

"Is there anything against that?"

"If you don't mind——"

"I don't mind," I assured him.

So U Ba Maung instructed his driver, and we drove out on to the long busy dusty road that runs past the airfield and came soon into the busy dusty streets of the city of Mandalay, and over everything hung the hot reddish haze of dust.

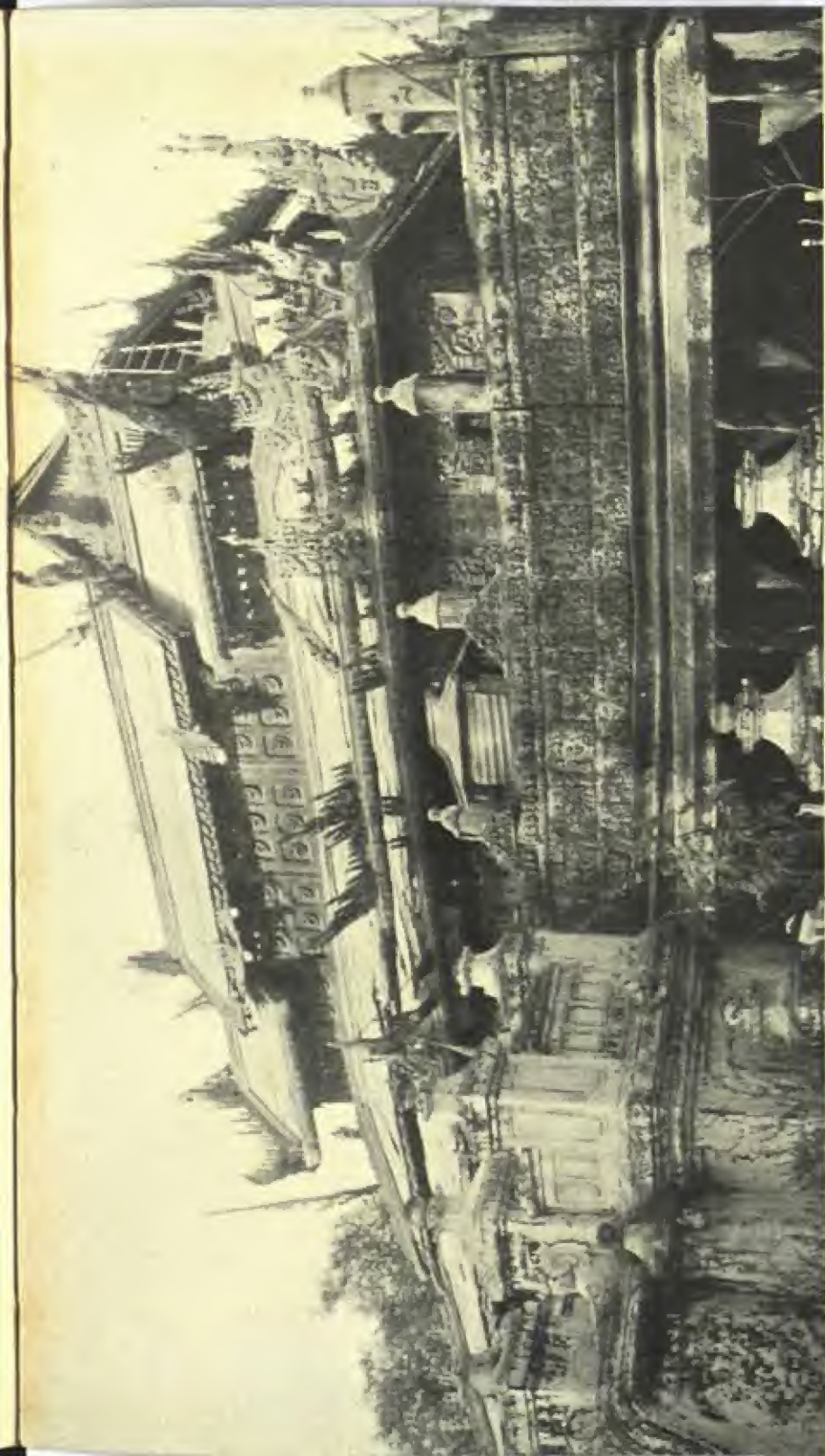
Properly speaking Mandalay no longer exists. The old city, built just about a hundred years ago for King Mindon, when he moved his palace bodily from Amarapura, the Golden City across the river from Sagaing, was destroyed in one night by British bombers in May 1945, and only the high encircling red brick wall of that 'miracle of rare device' remains. Burmans I talked to everywhere will not have it that the old city was a military objective; they say that 'there was no one in it', that the Japanese had gone from it.

"Then why?" I naturally demanded. Every time I asked it, and every time got the same answer.

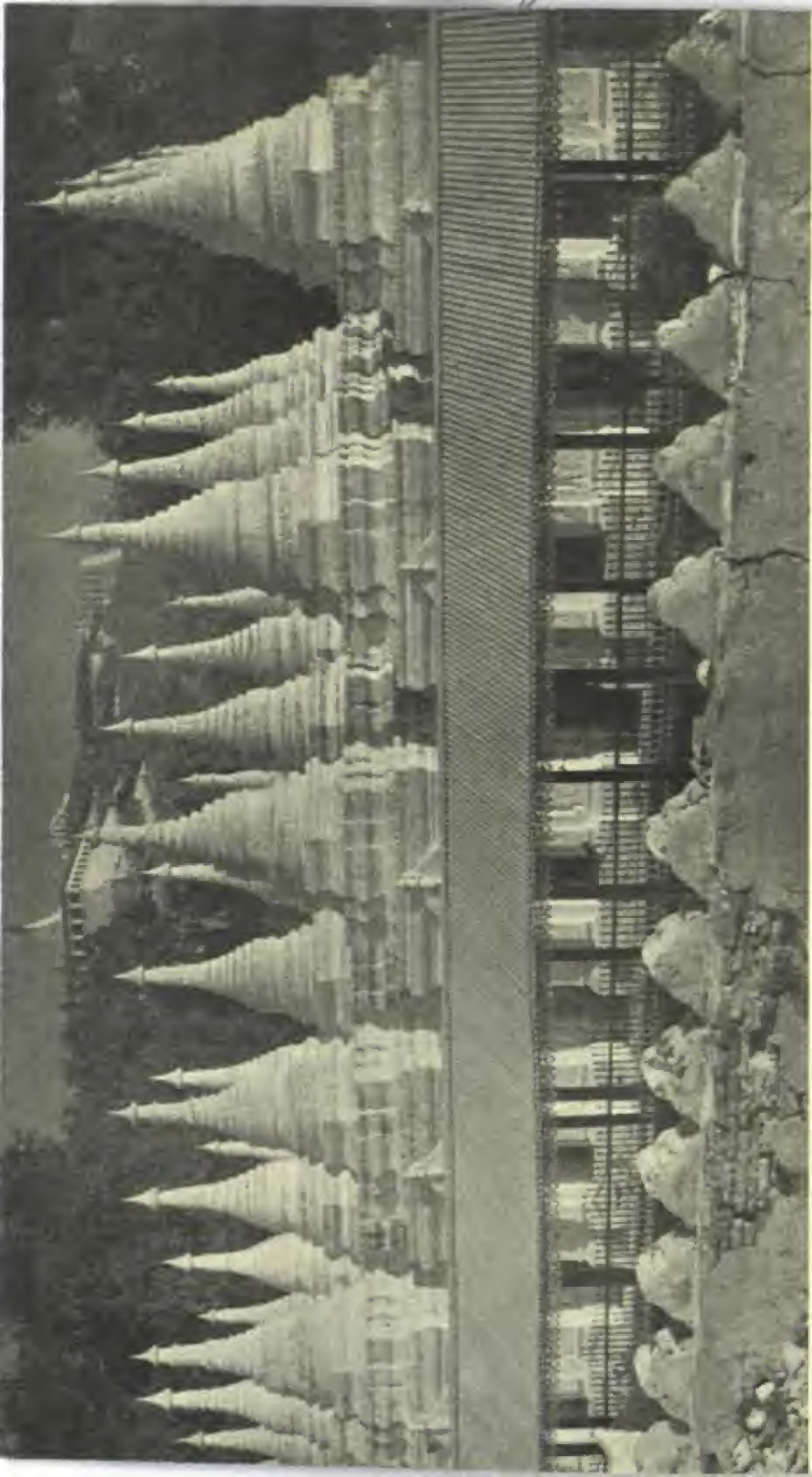
"They wished to break our national spirit."

When I urged that the destruction of one important national monument would not be calculated to destroy a nation's spirit—which I took to mean its nationalism—I was told, darkly, "But they destroyed other things, similarly, up and down the country. Other things dear to us."

These other things were never enumerated and I remained unconvinced. But whatever the reason for the destruction the



The 'Golden Monastery', Mandalay



At the foot of Mandalay Hill

tragedy is not lessened. From the model of the city which exists, and from pictures and descriptions of it, it must have been, with its tiered wooden roofs, gilded and lacquered, and intricately carved, the golden spires of monastery and palace, the ornate watch-towers like small pagodas along the walls, reflected in the moat, a dream of beauty. The town outside the walls was never much, and it also was destroyed by bombs. The shoddy, makeshift-looking Mandalay of today, which has no suggestion of a capital city about it, is mostly post-war. The streets are pavementless and unmade; there is no sewage system, no main water. It is full of refuse and pi-dogs. It is a dust-heap of a town. But that is not the whole of the picture. The rest of the picture is pure enchantment. The bombs did not destroy Mandalay Hill—although there was some fierce fighting there—or the Arakan Pagoda, the Golden Monastery, or the Kuthodaw; and though the great moat which extends round the walls on all four sides is in great part silted up now with water-hyacinths the beauty of the walls reflected in the water is something which to see once is to remember forever.

The address in Chinatown, it turned out, was merely the young man's business. I explained the situation and asked if I might still avail myself of his invitation. In reply he addressed himself to U Ba Maung, in English, respectfully addressing him as Uncle, in the polite Burmese fashion.

"Uncle," he said, "Miss Mannin is very welcome to stay in my house, but you must understand that I live very plainly. I have, for example, no commode sanitation."

I hastened to assure him that I would be very happy to accept his plain hospitality; that, indeed, I was most anxious to experience the life of ordinary Burmese families, not merely those of high Government officials.

So it was settled, and after we had each taken a glass of iced orangeade, my baggage was transferred from U Ba Maung's car to the young man's jeep and we set off through the crowded main street to a dusty suburb of small bamboo houses standing behind dusty trees at each side of wide unmade roads. Some children played in the dust outside the young man's house and some women sat on a bench against a paling fence under a dust-laden flowering shrub.

These middle-class Burmese houses are really only one large room, with a front door and a back door, windows at both sides, and a cubicle partitioned off as bedroom for the married couple. In this house the old mother had her bed at the far end, behind a dresser, near the back door, which opened across a yard to the kitchen quarters. At the other end of the room there was a low sleeping platform for the children, and a bed put up against the wall for the visitor. In the window corner there was a kitchen table at which the family ate. A wash-hand-stand was conveniently placed by the window near the children's sleeping place—convenient because everyone, children and adults both, cleaned their teeth leaning out of the window.

A corner of the yard was screened off for bathing. This bamboo screen arrangement is all very well if you wear a *longyi*—as I have described earlier—but as I had not been supplied with one it was a little difficult, for standing up I was taller than the screen and had nothing with which to cover my upper nakedness—except a small towel, and the problem was how to wear a towel and use it. Water can be poured over oneself in a squatting position, but sooner or later one has to straighten up. Bamboo fencing and a papya tree screened this compound off from the next one, and there always seemed to be people about, so that one invariably bobbed up at the wrong moment. The 'little house' was under the papya tree—a few steps up and a deep drop down. It is curious that the commode system—unavoidable in town houses with no compound—should be considered superior.

At night there were eight of us in the shuttered room—the three children and myself, the husband and wife—who took the youngest child in with them—the old woman, and the hired girl whose duty it was to sit by her all night, as she was suffering from some form of nervous paralysis and needed attention at regular intervals throughout the night. In the middle of the room there was a dog—which I did not know until the night I got out from under the mosquito net to go to the yard and stumbled in the darkness against a chair, which set the brute growling and barking in the most terrifying manner, till my host called to it from his cubicle. Across the room were the usual lines upon which to hang clothes and towels. This arrangement obviates the necessity for drawers and cupboards, and is

common to all but the most Europeanized of Burmese homes. At the front door end of the room there was the usual Buddha shrine, with the usual asters and the usual offerings of glasses of water. On the wooden walls were the usual calendars.

If one is not used to it, sleeping *en famille* is at first a little disturbing; one is aware of every sound, the breathing and movements of everyone in the room; the darkness is as alive as night in a forest. It can be claustrophobic, too, with the doors bolted and barred, and all the shutters closed fast. And, in Mandalay, hot; suffocatingly hot. The lack of privacy for dressing and undressing I found less disturbing, for in the East, generally, where doors are so often merely curtains—very often bamboo—and people move silently on bare feet, privacy as understood in the West does not exist.

My hostess had no English, nor had the girl who arrived at six to sit by the old woman's bedside till six in the morning, but there was an Esperanto of goodwill expressed in smiles. One day my hostess's sister came into the room and, smiling, demanded, "Show us, please, your pictures." I produced from my wallet the usual dog-eared photographs of one's nearest and dearest that one does carry around. Those of my daughter aroused a good deal of interest. How old was she? Was she married? And then, inevitable question, how old was I.

The two little girls could sing and recite in English, and in a curious parrot-fashion state their names and ages, for they went to an English school, but they had not much for conversational purposes. But they were not shy, and we played noughts-and-crosses, a game new to them, and did sums, and practised such helpful English sentences as 'his hat is on his head'—which I had seen in a Mass Education reader. My typewriter completely fascinated them, and they all but climbed into it when I was using it, which I did with the sweat pouring down my limbs and my finger-tips leaving wet marks on the keys. . . .

There was *pwe* in Mandalay and we bundled the children into the jeep and drove out to it through the warm, dusty moonlight. It is one of the several ways in which the Burmese are like the Irish, that the children stop up till all hours. In a wide

arid space flanked by pagodas a huge crowd had assembled; some wandered about looking at side shows, some stood in crowds watching an open-air film, some sat on the mats spread in the centre of the space; some people had already stretched themselves out and slept in the hot dusty moonlight. High and full and golden the moon seemed to burn like the sun in the dust-hazed air. Awake or asleep the crowd—men, women and children—would be there till about five in the morning.

On a stage at the far end of the *maidan* a band with bamboo clappers, drums and pipes, made loud harsh music, with a crash of brass somewhere in it, and a number of acrobats stood with various props ready to give a performance, but everyone sat with their backs to the stage, fascinated by the film show. There was a smell of frying food from the eating booths; and General Aung San's picture was everywhere. In the near distance Mandalay Hill stood out clearly in the moonlight, its summit pagoda strung with lights, like an outpost of the *pwe* itself. There was an exhibition of photographs organized by the U.S.I.S.—the United States Information Service—which was also responsible for the film show. The U.S.I.S. is everywhere in Burma. When I remarked this to my host he replied, "America woos Burma because it feels that China woos India."

Where the booths ended there was dust and palms and thorn-bushes and desolation and the smell of excrement. A pariah dog slept on a pile of shavings. We followed a dusty lane along a broken fence to the Kyauktawgyi, the 'Stone Pagoda'. A dark covered way led to a large white central pagoda surrounded by a score or so of small white satellites looking in the moonlight like crowding sails. In the pagoda itself people slept in the shadows on the broken floors, and in odd corners at the foot of massive pillars. In the dim light a huge alabaster and gold Buddha image was discernible. There were fading flowers and guttering candles, and silence untouched by the movement of bare feet over stone. The children dropped to their knees and folded their hands piously before the great image, gazing raptly. I was reminded of young children involuntarily crossing themselves and genuflecting in Roman Catholic churches.

It is said that it took ten thousand men thirteen days to

drag the huge block of marble to its present site to be carved into a Buddha image, and that King Mindon himself instructed the sculptors as to the carving of the face.

The hundreds of pagodas here at the foot of Mandalay Hill—there are actually over fifteen hundred—are in three groups: the Kyauktawgyi, the Sandamuni, and the Kuthodaw described earlier. The Sandamuni stands like the Kuthodaw in the middle of row upon row of lesser pagodas. It is built on the site of the temporary palace in which King Mindon lived whilst waiting for his city within the walls to be completed. It consists of 1774 slabs, each housed in a temple, which set forth the commentaries on the Pali text inscribed on the 729 slabs of the Kuthodaw.

Dark thick-leaved neam trees grow now in the wide avenues of the Kuthodaw pagodas, creating a curiously cloistral effect. Grass and flowering weeds are knee-high everywhere, and there is a twittering of unseen birds which serves only to emphasize the silence of this veritable city of pagodas. By moonlight and sunlight it is all equally astonishing—to the point of incredibility. That there *could* be so many pagodas, all alike and all in one place, hundreds and hundreds of them, avenues and avenues of them, marching in long straight rows—a whole *army* of pagodas! Words cannot deal with anything so astonishing. Neither, adequately, can the camera. It can probably only be properly taken in from the air.

But close to the Kuthodaw is something much more comprehensible—which, indeed, very readily stirs the imagination—the Golden Monastery, the Shwe Kyaung. This now crumbling wooden structure is all that is left of King Mindon's Mandalay, but it is enough to give an idea of the gilded and lacquered beauty that once dwelt behind the high red walls. After King Mindon's death the palace apartment in which he died was transferred, entire, to this place at the foot of Mandalay Hill by his son and successor, King Thibaw, who gave it to the *pongyis* for a *kyaung*. The monastery really grew up round the royal apartment.

But today, unless something is done about it, and done soon, it will collapse within the next few years. The planks of the verandah which runs round it, at the top of broken wooden

stairs, are rotten to the point of being unsafe. Here and there a beautiful intricately carved gable is awry, looking as though the next monsoon will sweep it away. The carvings of the doors and outer walls are most wonderful. Inside there are golden walls and pillars, and the remains of red lacquer. A towel line is stretched across a golden wall, and there are cobwebs everywhere, and the black dust of ages, and a crumbling decay. The *pongyis* have their mattresses and spittoons and books on the floors in different corners of the dark rooms, their robes like sudden bursts of sunlight in the dusty dimness. The throne room houses a Buddha image, as in the President's house in Rangoon. Surrounding the monastery there is a garden, with a roofed well, and banana trees, and jasmine bushes, and always and everywhere the tall palms etched against the sky, and the hot dust burning the bare feet.

I was impatient to climb Mandalay Hill, although I was assured there were no less than two thousand three hundred and thirty-four steps. The approach to it, across a burnt brown wasteland where the hutments of a military cantonment remain in various stages of ruin, is desolate in the extreme. At the foot of the staircase are the usual guardian crested lions, as huge as those of the Shwe Dagon, and dazzlingly white in the sunshine. The staircase is roofed and takes several turns. It takes an hour to walk up, and one begins to believe in the two thousand or so steps. The building in the middle of the burnt brown plain turns out to be a brewery. The canal cutting across the plain is being used in the scheme for a main water supply to the city, the water to be pumped to a reservoir to be constructed on Mandalay Hill. Until this scheme is realized Mandalay is supplied with drinking water from artesian wells, and water for general purposes from the moat, brought to the houses in kerosene tins by water-men who charge one anna a tin. (And you cannot change your water-man, however unpleasant or unsatisfactory he may be, for all the men have their agreed districts and streets, and none would dream of serving any territory but his own.)

At one point near the summit there are some extremely steep, almost vertical steps, and on the wall above them a plaque to the Royal Berkshire Regiment which 'after two days

of fierce fighting, March 10-12, 1945, liberated the Hill from the Japanese'.

On the broad roofed platform at the top there is a colossal golden Buddha image standing and pointing down to the city below. The figure which originally stood there was destroyed by fire in 1892. There are also up here on the platform numerous images from Buddhist mythology, including two grotesque painted figures, like something out of a rather frightening fairy-tale, one a giant the other a giantess. The giantess holds her amputated breasts, realistically coloured, in her hands, an offering to the Lord Buddha. . . .

Someone had placed a European felt hat on the head of a sacred elephant image. Everyone was amused. One of the good things about pagodas is that you can be ordinarily human in them. You can laugh in them and be gay, you can picnic in them, and if need be sleep in them. At all pagodas there are *zayats*, rest-houses, open-sided shelters, where the homeless, or the benighted traveller, may find refuge for the night—he is provided with a mat and in the morning with food. Had Jesus been born in Burma he would most certainly have had somewhere to lay his head.

When you have 'done' the Hill, and all at the foot of it, the next item on the sight-seeing agenda is the 'Arakan' Pagoda at the other side of the city.

This famous pagoda, which enshrines the Mahamuni Buddha image which gives the pagoda its correct name, is to Mandalay what the Shwe Dagon is to Rangoon. It is the most important pagoda in Mandalay. The image was removed from Arakan in 1784, when Arakan was invaded and conquered by the Burmese. It is of brass, but the pious have covered it inches deep in gold leaf. The approach to the shrine is rather like the East staircase to the Shwe Dagon; it is a covered way with small shops at each side, extending almost to the shrine itself, and selling all the things characteristic of pagoda bazaars—Buddha images, candles, joss-sticks, lacquer work, slippers—Mandalay is famous for its slippers—combs, ivories, rosary beads, tinselled coloured pictures of the Buddha, all manner of things religious and secular, the handmade and beautiful jumbled together with the most vulgar articles of mass

production. The covered way to the pagoda, and the interior of the shrine itself, is dirty with rice grains, betel-juice sputum, bird droppings, so that one cannot go barefoot with anything but discomfort and distaste. Since the Mahamuni Pagoda is as important to Mandalay as the Shwe Dagon to Rangoon it is a great pity it is not as well kept. The platform of the Shwe Dagon is swilled down every morning—true this makes for slippery going, but there is a strip of coconut matting forming a dry path all the way round.

At the Mahamuni Pagoda there is a pool of sacred turtles, but this too has a dirty and neglected look, and vultures hover and perch. Under the archway leading to the pool women sell bowls of bread to the devout, for the feeding of the turtles is an act of merit.

There is at this pagoda the same feeling of crowded 'busyness' as at the Sule Pagoda in Rangoon, perhaps because there is only the one great shrine and the devout congregate before it. The crowd, I noticed, was mainly women, some sitting back on their heels with clasped hands, eyes fixed on the great image, others sitting relaxed, smoking cheroots. Several men were right up on the image itself, acquiring merit by pasting on gold leaf. Women are not allowed beyond a certain barrier in front of the image, as sacred relics are buried under the floor, and where there are sacred relics women may not tread—'because of menstruation and such,' a Burmese woman explained to me, 'we are considered impure.' There are Buddhists who consider that in an enlightened religion such as Buddhism claims to be, making a great point of its reasonableness, the persistence of this superstition—which suggests a hangover from Brahmanism—is to be deplored, and progressive-minded Buddhists do in fact deplore it.

At odd times, when not burning my bare feet on the hot stones of pagodas, I saw the newspapers. Insurgents were busy in those days. 'Mandalay Goods Train Blown up by Insurgents', announced a headline, and 'Mandalay—Rangoon Line Cut'. 'Moulmein train attacked.' 'The train was fired on by K.N.D.V.O's and Communists. The armoured patrol train, piloting the train, escaped.'

In U Ba Maung's apartment over the bank, looking across



The old wall, Mandalay

On the Inle Lake, Shan States





The hot springs, near Lashio, Shan States

the moat to the old red wall at a point where tall palms thrust up above it, between gabled watch-towers, I would see the venerable *sayadaw* lying on his bed in his yellow robes, reading, with a large spittoon on the floor within reach. This room like the one opposite opened into a long living-room and the doors were always open. A wide verandah ran the length of the apartment and all the front rooms opened on to it. U Ba Maung would pace this verandah morning and evening, his large wooden rosary beads in his hand, reciting from the scriptures, contemplating the sacred Law. He had a great feeling, too, for the beauty of the old wall particularly at sundown, and a look of love would come over his kindly face when he gazed at it and spoke of it. He was pleased that Maurice Collis had spoken of the beauty of the changing light on it; he himself, who had been looking at it for years, found unceasing pleasure in it.

When in due course the holy man returned to his *kyaung* and I moved into U Ba Maung's apartment this pleasure became mine also. There is something curiously moving and dramatic about that destroyed splendour still 'with walls and towers girdled round'. When the tremendous orange full moon rose above the wall it became like the back-cloth to a theatrical set. But perhaps it was most beautiful when its old dull red was deepened and softened by the glow of sundown. Even early in the morning, before the sun was up and it looked almost grey, it was beautiful, with its palms dark against the lightening sky, and the long ranges of the Shan hills misty in the distance. Mandalay Hill in the near distance would seem near or far according to the light and the atmosphere, but crowned by its white pagoda it was a landmark always there, whereas the hills would be sometimes invisible for days on end. But then how dramatic and exciting their sudden emergence! When people walked along below the wall their reflections would be mirrored in the moat so sharp and clear in their bright reds and blues and yellows you could, as it were, have turned the whole thing upside down and it would have been as clear in the reflection as in the reality.

The walls, which are six miles round, can be entered with a police permit. I prevailed upon U Ba Maung to take me, though he warned me, "You will see nothing. Everything is gone." Everything except a white staircase and terrace and

portion of balustrade here and there, which the fire could not destroy and which escaped the bombs. There is the broken white masonry of the old Relic House, but of the monasteries, the houses of the king's ministers, the great clock tower, the Queen's House, the Palace itself, there is no vestige, for all were of wood. In a small hut with glass on all four sides stands a model of it all. It is something to gaze at long and long, in its carved and gabled intricacy, rebuilding it all in imagination behind the walls that now encompass only a little broken masonry and a vast park-like expanse of grass and trees crossed by white dusty roads.

After the British had deposed King Thibaw in 1885, within the walls became Fort Dufferin. Lord Curzon, writing as Viceroy in 1901, was anxious that the Palace should be preserved as a model of 'the civil and ceremonial architecture of the Burman kings'. He prophesied that of the many scores of monasteries in Mandalay, all in a state of dilapidation, the majority would in all probability have disappeared within the next forty or fifty years. It was a near guess, though at the beginning of the century such horror as did overtake, not merely the *pongyi-kyaungs* but the entire city, could not have been remotely envisaged. Curzon regarded the preservation of the Palace as 'both a compliment to the sentiments of the Burman race, showing that we have no desire to obliterate the relics of their past sovereignty, and a reminder that it has now passed for ever into our hands'.

In 1901 Burmese independence less than half a century later could not have been foreseen. Yet the walled city did pass into British hands forever, to be destroyed by them. The Queen's House and Audience Hall were occupied by the Upper Burma Club, and the surrounding wooden houses were tenanted by servants or let out as apartments, to which occupancy Curzon was opposed, because of the danger of fire. 'As long as this occupancy continues,' he wrote in his Minute, 'the entire Palace is in daily, almost in hourly, danger; and it is futile to issue orders, and to expend Government money upon the preservation of the whole, while leaving a perpetual fire-trap in one corner or part.' King Thibaw's Throne Room and Audience Hall became the Garrison Church. As alternative premises for the Club Curzon suggested the summer-house in

which Thibaw surrendered to the British in the person of General Prendergast, 'and which is unworthy of being preserved on its own account'. Other buildings were used as offices or residences by the British garrison, and Curzon wanted them all evacuated, and the apartments and gardens maintained as a national monument, 'open to the public from end to end, and carefully guarded night and day, by a sufficient body of watchmen'.

Lord Curzon's wishes were carried out, and between 1906 and 1907 nearly ninety-four thousand rupees were spent on restoration and repair work to the Palace and other buildings within the walls, and on monasteries and pagodas outside. When the Japanese entered Burma in 1942 the walled city became once again a garrison-city, and its end was sealed—for even if there were no Japanese troops inside the walls when the city was bombed its destruction may well have been simply one of the numerous ghastly mistakes inevitable in a war on that scale.

It is generally contended that only about two per cent of Burmans collaborated with the Japanese. That there was very little liking or respect for them after they had been a short time in the country would appear to be true. Everywhere, up and down the country, I heard them spoken of with bitterness and contempt, and U Nu says frankly in his book, *Burma Under the Japanese*,¹ that whereas at first the Japanese were welcomed, as liberators from the British, in time their arrogance and undisguised Fascism turned the feeling of the people to hatred.

Every morning a young *pongyi* came to U Ba Maung's apartment. He was so slight and silent-footed he seemed to glide into the room. I would look up from a book or from the typewriter and he would be there in one of the chairs against the wall opposite, his face hidden behind a newspaper taken from the table. U Ba Maung or his wife always seemed to know when he was there. One of them would come in and take his black lacquer lidded bowl. It would be returned filled with rice, and with little aluminium pots containing curries, and placed at his feet, but in the correct silent acceptance he would not look up from the newspaper. When U Ba Maung's wife

¹ Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1954.

brought the bowl to the *pongyi* she would prostrate herself before him, bowing to the ground, three times.

On Sundays a discussion group met at the house. There would be a lecture—on one occasion it was given by Dr. Soni—followed by discussion. Not all who attended were Buddhists. There were two Hindus, and among the Buddhists one was a Zen. In the intense heat of the afternoon we sat round a long table and on chairs against the walls, some fifteen to twenty people, and as the electricity was not on in the afternoons the fans were not working, but though everyone sweated no one dozed, and the discussion which followed the lecture was lively—indeed on one occasion it was fierce, with the two Hindus very obstreperous and the Zen Buddhist on his feet every few minutes, and a great need of chairmanship. The ‘learned lecturer’, as he was referred to, was caught out in flagrantly contradicting himself, and when the Hindus, jointly, pounced upon him, he shamelessly declared that there was no time to discuss the point now as he had no doubt everyone wanted their tea. . . . But after that the discussion continued for another half hour.

When Dr. Soni lectured and presided, however, such is the quiet moral force of his personality that there was no disorderliness, and the discussion evolved into a debate between him and myself, very patient and reasonable on his part, a little diffident on mine, for though by that time I had had a good deal of Buddhist discussion, in that company of scholars I was very much the novice—but a novice very willing to learn, and wide open to conversion.

I was taken to a Meditation Centre, the Bawdigon Veiktha, some two miles out from the city centre. It was not by any means my first, but the only one at which I was ever able to conceive meditation in any sense—the Buddhist sense of the practice of insight, or the general Western sense of contemplation—being possible. It is a leafy oasis of peace, with many flowers. The meditation huts are set beside a stream, with planks across to them. Each hut has a tiny verandah, and a small lamp hanging in the porch. The huts are shady with wild plantains reaching over their roofs, and the garden compound in which they stand was then aflame with cannas. The snag, no doubt, was the mosquitoes rising from the stream.

But there would probably be no more than rose from the moat, I reflected. The mosquitoes of Mandalay do not hunt in couples but in swarms.

The nights were not peaceful in Mandalay, for a night-watchman inside the barbed wire which enclosed the bank building struck the hours on a gong, each stroke very loud and strong, and with a deliberation that made the most of ten, eleven, and twelve o'clock—indeed for the midnight assault I am not sure he did not strike thirteen, for good measure. And in the early hours he sang a little song, lustily, to prove his wakefulness. It was Moulmein all over again, plus the mosquitoes.

It was on the Mandalay agenda that I be taken to the ancient capital of Sagaing, and I was duly dispatched in a jeep with three young men, two of them from the Mandalay office of the Buddha Sasana Council, the other the editor of a religious paper. A late start lost us the cool of the day and it was an incredibly hot and dusty journey. We hurtled across the paddy fields in a choking cloud of dust, and the dust lay white on trees and bushes. The tall leafless flame-of-the-forest trees dropped their scarlet lily-flowers into the deep loose dust at their feet. The front of the jeep was like an oven.

We came down to the Irrawaddy and a shore of burning sand and waited for the ferry. The train to Sagaing, which we had passed, though it had started an hour or more earlier from Mandalay, also ended its journey at the river, for the great suspension bridge was blown up by the British in their retreat in 1942 and was not yet repaired. Hay was being loaded on to boats by Indian coolies. A stall under a tree sold 'cold drinks'. Young men lounged on a bench in front of a makeshift café and watched us with a mildly derisive interest, like corner-boys anywhere. Presently we moved on over strips of perforated zinc, designed to assist the wheels over the deep loose dust, on to the ferry. At the other side, in the foreground there were trees, and behind, reaching away into the distance wooded hills each with the white 'lighthouse' of a pagoda at the top.

When we disembarked we drove along under trees, by the river, to the house of the D.C. standing back from the road in neglected gardens. There was a long arid wait here, with

completely no conversation, whilst the young man deputed to be the guide to the numerous Sagaing pagodas was searched for. He had gone out for a walk. I asked for water with which to wash my dust-covered feet and it was brought to me on the verandah. A child's broken toy lay among the rank weeds in the dust below. Time passed and the day already hot grew hotter. The young men sat in silence and smoked cheroots. When I was tired of looking at the calendars on the walls of the room in which we waited I went out and sat on the verandah and looked at the sunlight glinting on the fronds of the tall palms, and at the white birds perched among the scarlet blossoms of the flame-of-the-forest trees.

The young man was found eventually. He remarked pleasantly that we were earlier than expected, and it was too hot to argue. We climbed back into the oven on wheels and there followed another drive, for about six miles, through the white dust.

Present-day Sagaing is a crowded ramshackle little town of dust and dogs and open-air booths and a smell of frying. Paradoxically Sagaing lives in its past, survives in its pagodas—though the most important of those are now ruins.

There is a limit to the number of pagodas one can mentally assimilate in a given number of days, and as we hurtled along once more in the smothering dust I noted dully that pagodas had ceased to be spired and become domed; solid *stupas* of stone . . . but I was fast sinking into a stolid stupor of dust and heat.

We got in and out of the jeep, paddling across hot broken stones, hot dry grass, in our bare feet. There was an enormous bee-hive shaped stone *stupa*, as ugly as a gasometer; there was a crumbling pagoda, with figures of elephants flanking the staircase; it was built in 1430, but the elephants were not added until fifty years later. Here, high up among the broken masonry, among cloistral ruined arches, goats grazed off the dry grass and thorn bushes, the goatherd in charge of them old and grey and curiously Biblical. There were other pagodas. To be sure there were others; many of them. Too many, so that I have not remembered them.

But I remember the silversmith's on the way back, the

beautiful handwrought silver bowls, and the owner one of the old-style Burmese, with long hair twisted into a knot on top. And I remember the weaving school, where there were Japanese instructors. "Why Japanese?" I asked, and received the answer, "They are very good." Which seems a good enough reason, and to the good that the war-time hatred of the Japanese is not carried over into peace-time.

I left Mandalay and went up to Maymyo, and I came back to Mandalay, but still I did not visit the ruined city of Amarapura, although it was on the Attorney General's agenda given me before I left Rangoon, and although it was so close. At the time I did not realize its importance. Certain important omissions seem inevitable on every major journey. The overloaded mind has its aberrations. At times part of it seems to go to sleep—perhaps in sheer self-preservation. Neither the humidity of Rangoon nor the dust-laden swelter of Mandalay is conducive to keeping it fully awake.

(IX)

COOL COFFEE COUNTRY: MAYMYO

"You will like Maymyo," everyone said. "It is like England!" As though that could be a recommendation to anyone who had travelled some seven thousand miles to get away from the native heath—and climate. More welcome was the assurance that it was 'cool'. Actually at mid-day it was 85°F., much less than which in England constitutes a 'heat-wave'. But the wind was cool, and when the body has been wet, day and night, for weeks it is astonishing and very pleasant suddenly to realize that one's skin is dry. In the evenings the temperature fell sufficiently to make one glad to put on a cardigan. And after the dust of the burning plain it was exciting to find the trees as fresh and green as an English April, with occasional drifts of pink or white blossom against the pale clear greenery.

But Maymyo is not really 'English'; it is much more 'French Riviera', with its avenues of eucalyptus trees and its bougainvillea-covered walls and arbours. In what the Burmese call 'the English time' it was a very popular hill-station, as indicated by the street-names—The Mall, Downing Street, Church Road, Club Road; a little way out there is the Harcourt Butler lake, named after the Governor. The houses are red brick, with vaguely pseudo-Tudor effects in the shape of nailed-on timber. It was a garrison-town before the war, and there is now a large Burmese military cantonment. The residential area is mostly pine woods, with English-style half-timbered houses standing back in large gardens.

The town itself is nothing much. There is a main street of open-fronted shops, with plenty of refuse in the gutters, but no wandering cows and comparatively few pariah dogs—though I saw a bitch lying with a new-born litter in a gutter dust-bin.

There are numerous Chinese and Indian shops. In the market I saw what I had not seen hitherto—bunches of sea-lavender. There is a large modern cinema, a small white pagoda, a Tibetan monastery with prayer papers fluttering from tall poles; and there are pavements at the sides of the streets—at least in the main streets.

The day I arrived in Maymyo the Lashio-Mandalay train was blown up by insurgents and seven passengers killed. It seemed such a senseless campaign. What, I asked, did they hope to gain by it? I was told that the idea was to harass the government, and "they are putting the pressure on now before the rains come".

The previous day some insurgents had come in for the *puè* and the military police got wind of them, with the result that there was fighting, in which one of the policemen was killed. Walking with one of the daughters of the house where I was staying my attention was suddenly attracted by an awning outside one of the buildings in the main street and something evidently going on. My first thought was that it was a wedding, though there was no music. But when we came close what people were gazing at under the awning was a bier. The open coffin rested on a trestle table. There were candles and a cross at the head of it. In the coffin lay the dead young policeman—he was twenty-six and an only son—with a piece of muslin drawn across his face to keep off the flies. His mother stood beside the coffin lifting the muslin for anyone who wished to look upon the dead face of her son. People came and peeped and moved away, without speaking. The mother also did not speak. She stood there pitifully revealing her son's face for those who wished to look on him for the last time, and the look on her own face was more pitiful than any weeping.

My companion had known the young man and she went to the head of the coffin and spoke to the mother and looked when the muslin was lifted. I waited in the background. A few chairs had been arranged in rows, and a number of people sat in silence. There was a middle-aged man, the father, whose grief lacked the tragic composure of the mother. His misery was abject and helpless. It was as though in the mother grief had hardened into a bitter anger.

"They are Christians?" I asked, as we left the place.

"Yes—Catholics." She added, "My father is attending the funeral this afternoon."

My host in Maymyo was another friend of the Attorney General's—U Ba Tu, a coffee planter, with a thirty-four-year-old wife and twelve children, the eldest a charming girl of eighteen, the youngest a baby of a year or so. They were a delightful family, and in their cool pleasant house I had more leisure than at any time since I had arrived in the country. Not that I had gone to Burma in order to have leisure, but the two days in which there was time to write letters unhurriedly came as quite a little 'holiday'.

On the day I arrived it was arranged that I was to go with the eldest girl the following day to visit the coffee plantations a few miles out. But by the evening of that day there was news of more insurgent trouble, and it would be impossible to go; the insurgents were, said U Ba Tu, "right across the road". There was, however, a nursery coffee plantation not far out which it would be safe to visit, and I would get some idea of coffee raising. I had never seen coffee growing, and just as some people cherish a longing 'for to see an orange growing on a tree', I had long cherished a desire to pick a bunch of coffee as one would a bunch of roses. But it seemed that if I wanted to do that I must come back in April, for not till then does the coffee come into flower. In April there always comes a heavy shower of rain, followed by another about ten days later, and which, because it brings the coffee into flower, is called the 'blossom shower'.

In the nursery plantation the slender seedling coffee bushes were each in little bamboo 'houses' of bamboo thatch. The older and stronger ones were planted out between saplings of other trees whose function was to provide shade for the coffee bushes. Coffee likes shade and coolness, and Maymyo, at an altitude of three thousand feet, suits it very well.

At one side of the compound of U Ba Tu's house the green coffee beans are laid out on a cement floor to dry in the sun, when they become a pale yellow or fawn. When they are dry they are swept up and gathered into sacks and sent off to Mandalay and Rangoon. Across from the drying ground there is a retail shop where the coffee is roasted and ground and made

up into packets for selling retail. One day I shall know whether coffee flowers have the wonderful scent of the finished product. . . .

On the way up to Maymyo we stopped at a *Nat* shrine, where we were given a bunch of white asters and neam leaves, for good luck—"to keep away evil spirits," as they said, tucking them into the windscreen of the jeep.

(X)

*THE NORTHERN SHANS: HSIPAW
AND LASHIO*

I HAD come up from Mandalay to Maymyo without an armed escort, but the superintendent of police considered one necessary from Maymyo to Hsipaw—half way to Lashio—as the road went through insurgent areas. Between Mandalay and Maymyo, where the road leaves the paddy fields and runs through the jungle, the undergrowth has been slashed back at each side of the road leaving a clearing wide enough to necessitate any gun-men coming out into the open to pot at passing traffic. In some places bull-dozers have been used; in other places the bushes and scrub have been burnt off.

From Maymyo to Hsipaw this has not been possible, for it would mean destroying whole forests. At times the road is a series of hair-pin bends zig-zagging down into steep wooded ravines and climbing up again in another series of zigzags on the other side. In the early part of the journey the escort used its guns to aim at wild fowl in the woods. But though there were several halts for this purpose the bag only totalled one. We stopped for some time at the tall wooden house of a police superintendent to pick up additional escort for the rest of the journey. The half dozen guns we already had with us were not considered sufficient for the road ahead. Although the house was in the next compound to the police barracks it took a long time for the 'police boys', as they were referred to, to get themselves into uniform and come round with a jeep. In the meantime with the superintendent of police from Hsipaw I sat and drank green tea and admired the roses in the garden below. It was hot and shadeless outside and comparatively cool in the house, but the day was going to get hotter yet and I was impatient to leave. Also the jeep in which I travelled was

U Ba Tu's, and I knew that he wanted it back as quickly as possible. But the Burmese, who are like the Irish in various ways, are like them in this, that there's always 'time enough', so never any hurry.

In due course the khaki-clad lads—they were all very young—came round with their guns and cartridge-belts and we took to the road again with our double escort. The lady of the house, who spoke no English, nor understood any, but between whom and myself there had been the Esperanto of mutual goodwill and smiles, gave me a rose from her garden at parting. The three jeeps moved off down the wide road between the bamboo houses under their palms and plantains, leaving behind a great mist of dust.

We were now in Shan land, with covered bullock waggon at the sides of the roads, the tall pointed hats everywhere, and men with long Chinese moustaches. A wayside shanty announced 'Chin Sein Licensed for Opium and Liquor'. Another merely announced itself as 'Liquor Shop'. But presently there was the 'Success Dispensary'. For a time there were paddy fields, where buffaloes grazed the stubble; then the road climbed up through wooded hills and the landscape was suddenly curiously Gothic. The superintendent halted the jeeps that we might take in the wonder of the Gokteik Viaduct spanning the valley in the near distance. This astonishing structure is a railway bridge which crosses the valley at a height of 870 feet. The superintendent said he would go down into the valley with us, for the sake of the scenery, though at this point he and his men were due to leave us. The journey would be continued with the single escort with which I had set out from Maymyo.

In the early afternoon we arrived in Hsipaw, dusty and straggling, and of no particular interest, so that there turned in my mind the idea of pushing on to Lashio—if transport should be available. The pleasant young British Consul at Maymyo, who had been hospitable and kind, had been at some trouble to get in touch with U Laik, Minister, at Hsipaw, and he was willing to put me up. But as we drove through Hsipaw it seemed to me a place to get out of rather than to stay in. There are places that oppress the spirit with a kind of desolation that emanates from them. In England they exist along by-passes

and in outer-London newly built-up areas. Hsipaw seemed to me such a place; as though there were no reason for it. It produces oranges and tea, and I cannot find that any other interest attaches to it. There is the Pawgyo Pagoda, to be sure, but that is some six miles out.

I found U Laik at the Residence, a large wooden house like a circuit house built by and for the British. U Laik was geniality itself. I was very welcome to stay in his house. His wife produced a bowl of water that I might remove the dust from the road, and his servants produced rice and curry. He sat and talked to me whilst I ate. The Consul had expected that I might find 'some Embassy people' at the Government Guest House, but when I inquired after this party, whom it had occurred to me it might be amusing to meet, I learned that they had gone further on in quest of game to shoot. U Laik inquired what was my 'program' and I in turn inquired what Hsipaw had to offer. There was really only the pagoda, he said. In that case, I said, I would walk round and have a look at it, and then, if he could let me have transport, push on to Lashio. But apparently the small white pagoda near at hand was unimportant; the important pagoda was some way out—but he would take me in his car. But was I determined to leave for Lashio when I had seen it? I thanked him for his offered hospitality but said that there seemed no point in delaying my arrival in Lashio once I had seen the pagoda—"if there is nothing else here," I added. He replied that no, there was nothing else here.

"You can get me transport to go on to Lashio today?"

"I shall have to get in touch with the superintendent of police. You will need an escort. Unfortunately I cannot spare you my car—you will have to travel with the police."

"So long as I get there," I said.

So often travel seems a series of struggles to get to places only to start a fresh series of struggles to get out of them again—at least on journeys of this kind. . . .

A peon was sent off to the police barracks, and in the meantime U Laik obligingly drove me out to the pagoda.

It was pleasant to travel in a car again after so many jeeps, and the pagoda had the virtue of being different from the usual *stupa*, being built under a high dome supported by white pillars.

The general effect is more that of an ancient Greek temple than of a pagoda. As at the Arakan Pagoda women are not allowed to approach close to the golden pagoda under the dome because of sacred relics buried there.

There is a *pongri-kyaung* close by. In Hsipaw, with four thousand inhabitants, there are no less than thirteen *pongri-kyaungs*.

When we got back to the Residence the armed escort had arrived in a jeep, and U Ba Tu's jeep set out on the long run back to Maymyo.

The last lap of the journey, in the dust of the Lashio road, seemed interminable. The trees of the endless forests at each side of the road were white with dust. We halted at Kyaume for a courtesy call on the Assistant Resident.

We found him in a pleasant English-style house on a hill overlooking the town, a huddle of roofs in a shallow valley. On the hilltop at the other side there was the usual white pagoda. The Assistant Resident's house was covered with a kind of orange-coloured fleshy honeysuckle of great beauty. We found him at home and he seemed very pleased to receive a visitor. Sitting chatting in the comfortable lounge I had a weak feeling of longing to finish the journey in that honeysuckled house with the quiet, pleasant Assistant Resident—but Kyaume was not on the agenda, and Lashio was.

So we went on again, and it was dust, dust, all the way, for an hour or two yet. Sometimes the trees and bushes were completely white with it, sometimes red with it, but always covered with it. For a long time the landscape was merely monotonously forest, then at last it opened out and there was a vista of blue wooded hills in the near distance and the first glimpse of Lashio in a wonderful setting of range upon range of hills, reaching away eastward into China.

We drove up to the Residence, on rising ground and looking along a valley of great beauty, and I stepped out of the jeep hot, dusty and exhausted, to find the Commissioner sitting on the terrace with various people gathered about him. He wore European clothes and a straw hat. We shook hands, I presented my credentials, and was told "go and take your tea now." His wife and nephew sat with me whilst I took tea, in a lounge

furnished in good European style. When I returned to the terrace he had gone, and I never saw him again. A young man in European clothes introduced himself to me as the Commissioner's 'personal assistant', and asked me what was my 'program'. . . .

I replied with a wan smile that I had no program; that I had been hoping the Commissioner would suggest one, and that to this end the Attorney General had wired him to render me 'every possible assistance'. I was in this country, I said, to get background for a novel I had long had in mind, also to get material for a book which would present Burma in independence interestingly and sympathetically to the West. I did not know what Lashio had to offer; the scenery, I said, was incredibly beautiful, but it took more than scenery to make a book. It would interest me, for example, to see something of the Shan villages. I was very tired; it was evening, and I had left Maymyo at seven that morning. There was something vaguely unhelpful in the young man's manner which in my tired state I found dispiriting.

"You could visit the hot springs," he finally said, and his tone suggested that that was about all that I could do. He added that he could supply a jeep for that purpose in the morning. He asked where was I staying. I told him with a lady I understood to be interested in a child clinic. He looked surprise, then said oh well, yes, a lot of the women took an interest in the child welfare scheme. I showed him the address and he said that he would take me there. On the way he told me that my hostess was a widow and had several unmarried daughters living with her; she did not speak English, but her daughters spoke a little. I felt just one degree more dispirited.

The house in which I was to stay was half way down a road which descended into the town. Lashio, I observed, with some surprise, was not dominated by a pagoda but by a mosque—a large white mosque with twin minarets thrusting up from the very middle of the town.

The house to which I was taken was, like all the houses, of wood with a long roof projecting over the verandah extending all round the house. There was a great commotion of pigeons under the eaves. A Chinese family lived on the ground floor, the family whose guest I was on the floor above, reached up

a flight of wooden steps up to the verandah. There was an iron-barred gate at the top of the steps. There were a great many children about and a good deal of noise—of children, dogs, radios, geese; of traffic up and down the hill, mostly, it seemed, lorries.

With the young man I entered a wooden-walled L-shaped room off the verandah, and my hostess, an elderly woman, received me gravely, and her four daughters, their ages between seventeen and twenty-two or so, smiled brightly, but they had very little English, and they understood even less. The prettiest and most smiling was called Rosie; she was also the one who had most English. There were two little boys who came and peeped and smiled and darted away—nephews, I gathered later. The young man chatted for a while with my hostess, who looked from him to me, gravely studying me, and the girls smiled, and the noises from the street throbbed on the warm air and in my aching head. I was suddenly overwhelmingly in the grip of the feeling which probably every traveller experiences at some point on a major journey—the feeling of not being able to cope, yet having to cope. On the Indian journey it hit me in Bangalore, when I lay on my bed and said aloud, "I want to go home." On the Burmese journey it came upon me in Lashio. But Lashio, like Bangalore, was only half-way—the point at which it seems to happen. It is simply that half-way is as far as one can go before tiredness, mental and physical, asserts itself. A good night's sleep would restore the nervous energy and the moral courage, but on this kind of journey that is a boon but seldom granted—if at all. No traveller ever packs up and goes home half-way—at least I never heard of it; the attack runs its course, the traveller recovers, and upon a kind of second-wind continues to the journey's end.

The young man finished his conversation with my hostess and took his leave. He has assured me that as soon as he had gone the girls would all start speaking English, but this I had doubted, and I was proved right. As nothing else seemed indicated I suggested to Rosie that we went for a walk. Apart from a need to stretch my legs after being for so many hours in jeeps I felt that less conversational strain would be imposed. I would be relieved of the strain of making myself understood, they of understanding. Another of the girls joined us and we

set out in the direction of the town—which I had said I would like to see.

But we did not go into the town, but branched off instead across some wasteland and came out eventually into what in England would be described in a house-agent's list as a select residential area. Here one-storey houses stood in small gardens. I was evidently being shown the refined aspects of Lashio. But if it was not what I wanted to see at least it had the virtue of being quiet. Various people greeted the girls as we walked. There were a number of Chinese, the women in their long straight slit skirts.

When we got back, without having seen the town except at a distance, I found a place laid with cutlery at the end of the table. Soon my hostess brought food in and set a plate before me and indicated that I should eat.

I turned from her to Rosie.

"Am I to eat alone?" I asked.

"We have eaten," said Rosie. She went out with her mother and I helped myself to rice and curry, but I had no appetite. They intended, I realised, to 'show respect', but being respected can leave one very lonely.

With nothing to read and no one to talk to I looked round the room. There were numerous family photographs on the walls, and the usual quota of calendars. There was a Buddha shrine in one corner, with asters set in vases before it, and glasses of water. Rooms opened out of this room on three sides, and at the top of each room was a trellis, so that it would be impossible to go into any room and shut out the sounds from the rest. A wooden screen in the middle of the room shut off the kitchen quarters opening out behind. There was a vase of roses in the middle of the long table, and an oil lamp. All the windows had iron bars across—this is general in Burma, but sometimes, in some curious way, they seem more in evidence. In Lashio I was intensely aware of them.

For some time after the meal I sat alone. Presently one of the girls came in and sat at the table doing, I gathered, some kind of studying. Later the mother came in and sat beside me on the settee and read a newspaper—as it was not in English I could not amuse myself reading the headlines. I occupied myself writing a few notes. When Rosie came in I said I thought I would go to bed, as I was tired, but first I must go to the

latrine. She fetched a torch and we set out—along the verandah, down the steps, round the corner, along the side of the house, and across the garden, to the usual little hut under a plantain, with the usual deep-down hole. Dogs barked as we retraced our steps. Clearly any desire to get up in the night would have to be repressed, I reflected, not only on account of the long walk and the dogs but because the gate at the top of the stairs was locked. And if there is one thing more than another calculated to induce a desire to get up in the night it is the knowledge that it is impractical. . . .

I had a room to myself. It contained a bed, a small table supporting a radio set, a chair, the usual wire line for clothes, and along the ledges of the wooden walls a collection of empty cigarette and laxative tins, Dettol bottles, orange juice bottles, cardboard boxes, and cartridge cases. Clearly the owner of the room was averse to throwing anything away. There were a number of holes in the wooden walls, both on to the street and into the living-room. They were curious holes, because the wood thinned away to the edge at one side. There was one beside my pillow. In the morning I was suddenly aware of an eye pressed to it on the other side. "Hullo!" I said, and there was a burst of childish laughter and a scamper of bare feet.

The day stirred to activity with a cooity-cooing of the pigeons under the caves, the wailing of a child, the yelping of dogs, the shrill babble of women's voices. I put on a dressing-gown and taking a towel went in search of water, but, as one of the girls indicated, it was all ready for me—on the verandah; an enamel bowl full of water and a piece of soap had been placed on a chair, and there was a bucket of water beside it—the latter presumably for my feet. I would have preferred not to have made my toilet on the verandah in full view of the street and the houses opposite and at each side, but there was no help for it.

A Chinese girl on the verandah of the next house stood and stared, fixedly. No one else was washing on any verandah, though a Chinese girl in a straight blue dress slit at the sides was cleaning her teeth, mug in one hand, on the doorstep opposite. Presently she went into the house and came out again carrying a chamber-pot, which she took up the garden. In a window of a house across the road another Chinese girl was

applying oil from a bottle to her long black hair. In the garden girls were filling buckets with charcoal from a large corrugated iron bin lying on its side. A girl and a child squatted on a stone slab beside corrugated iron water bins and washed from a kerosene tin.

There were cement gutters across the garden to carry away the waste water—presumably to a soak-away somewhere. There was a sweeping of rooms and verandahs with feather mops. Women went down the road with towels round their shoulders and baskets on their arms to the market—there were many Chinese women, in their slit black three-quarter length tunics. There are, in fact, more Chinese, Indians and Burmans in Lashio than Shans.

When I came in from the verandah Rosie was placing fresh flowers and fresh glasses of water in front of the Buddha shrine. She turned, smiling, as I entered. "Please take your tea," she said, and indicated the table, where a place had been laid and coffee and buttered toast with sugar on it awaited me. Rosie finished at the shrine and went out. I drank a cup of coffee and ate a piece of the toast then finding myself still alone returned to the verandah.

There was a chanting from a nearby *pongyi-kyaung*. A very young baby in the Chinese house opposite wailed endlessly. In front of the house opposite a little Chinese girl wearing blue trousers moved about with a baby tied to her back. Firewood was piled up on the balconies and verandahs and at the gables of the houses. Some of the smaller houses were of bamboo and enclosed behind split bamboo palings. The pavementless road was clear of garbage and a corrugated iron dustbin stood outside each house.

Bamboo and corrugated iron—what would the East do without it? The whole of Lashio seems to be constructed of these two things. From that verandah the town appeared as a sloping huddle of rusty corrugated iron roofs almost touching—many of them do in fact touch. A mist rose from the valley that held the town, and it was cold to the bare feet on the wooden floors. The minarets of the mosque were an unlit white against hills still dark. So beautiful is the setting of Lashio, range upon range of wooded hills, but the town itself is ramshackle and decaying, where it is not new and jerrybuilt and garish.



Pagoda, near Hsipaw, Shan States



In ancient Pagan

The Lashio-Namkam bus suddenly emerged from a side turning. Upon a strip of board below its roof it announced itself as 'The Daily Mail Lashio-Namkam Service'. Its roof was stacked with bales and bundles. Its glassless windows were packed with brown and yellow faces. There was a white bird's wing on its bonnet.

Soon after eight the jeep arrived to take us to the hot springs. But it was another half hour before we left; there was so much food to be packed into a large tiered aluminium tiffin-carrier—rice, curry, fried eggs, vegetables, all manner of things. There was also a basket containing Chinese bowls, chop-sticks, cups, and a huge thermos flask of coffee in a wicker case. I could not imagine how we could all pile into the jeep with these things. But two of the girls sat in front with the driver and myself, one girl on the lap of the other, and the other two sat behind with the mother, and somehow the two children were tucked in behind the three adults at the back, and the tiffin-carrier and basket were somehow wedged in as well.

About two miles out from Lashio there is the dusty straggle of houses of Old Lashio. Soon after begins a wildly beautiful landscape of wooded hills with sharp-peaked mountains thrusting up behind. The mauve jungle clematis trailed its grape-bloom over everything, and there were numerous blossom trees like puffs of smoke against the dark background of the tree-covered hills. The people along the road, both men and women, wore the high-pointed Shan hats. The men were often stripped to the waist, revealing bodies covered with tattooing, back and chest, arms and legs. Some of them were so heavily tattooed that they looked more like blue men than brown or yellow men. The Shans tattoo more heavily than the Burmans.

Various reasons are given for the tattooing. Certain forms of tattooing are considered protection against wounds and snake-bite and evil spells—have, in fact magical properties. But also a generation ago, though it is said to be dying out now, a man was not considered manly unless he had some tattooing on his body, for tattooing is a painful process, and not to be tattooed was regarded as an unmanly shrinking from pain.

The hot springs are twenty-four miles out from Lashio.

They have been organized into a small waterfall and a square pool which flows away into a narrow stream through the jungle. We found a large Chinese party camping under improvised tents and having an enormous wash-day in the hot pool. Steam rose in a bathroom-like cloud from the upper pool cascading down over the artificially contrived stone terraces. The little boys of our party immediately stripped off their clothes and went naked into the water. They were soon followed by their aunt, who had shuffled out of her *longyi* and into another which she tucked up under her arm-pits and in which she entered the shallow pool. When she had sufficiently immersed herself, squatting in the water and making swimming strokes with her arms, she called the boys to her and soaped them thoroughly.

An old Chinese woman with a wrinkled map of a face, and feet so tiny she seemed hardly able to totter on them, came down to the pool with a basket of washing. She wore a long dark shapeless tunic, and her legs appeared to be wrapped in thick grey woollen puttees. Her flimsy shoes were fastened by a criss-crossing strapping over the leg wrappings. After a time the girls and the driver of our party all shuffled into different *longyis* and went into the water. The girls sat up under the cascade, soaping themselves and enjoying themselves hugely. I found myself wondering what they would have thought had I suddenly produced a European swim suit and joined them, their own bathing being conducted with such excessive modesty. Instead I took a picture of them at their ablutions, then wandered off into the jungle, interested in the way the ferns flourished in the steam beside the hot stream, and finding sweet-scented jungle jasmine, and fighting the feeling of loneliness.

Presently everyone came out of the water, shuffled out of their wet *longyis* under cover of dry ones on top, then the driver brought a rug and spread it in the shade of a tree and we picnicked. It was their breakfast and each consumed large helpings of rice and curry and fried eggs—I had not till then seen fried eggs eaten with chopsticks. It struck me as an astonishing feat, and one I could never master. I was offered cutlery, but had no appetite for anything but a banana or two. All else apart, for me it was both too early in the day and too hot for rice and curry.

When we moved on we left a scattered litter of greasy paper, banana skins, tins, lids of tins, added to the evidence of other picnickers beside the pool. Fortunately as the people smoke cheroots there no cigarette packets, nor, as we were not in the ice cream belt, ice-cream cartons. But tins are perhaps the ugliest litter of all, and so very indestructible.

We continued on through paddy country to the dusty little town of North Hsenwi, in Hsenwi State, six miles further on. Inevitably we visited the pagoda. It turned out to be a quite different kind of pagoda, looking from outside more like a Swiss chalet. There is a flight of wooden steps up to a shrine-room—we left our shoes at the bottom of the steps. We all knelt down and everyone made their obeisances to the Buddha image. I did not make any obeisances but I tucked the sweetpeas I have been given at the school we had visited on the way into a vase in front of the shrine, because it seemed a pity to let them die in the heat.

Then we set off to see the new pagoda being built some distance away. We walked along a road of deep dust, with paddy fields at one side, and came to a *pong-yi-kyaung*. Close to it men were working with picks and shovels and there was all the paraphernalia of building. Suddenly as we picked our way across planks I saw that the men working on the building had heavy chains round their legs, fastened to a belt round their waists.

Startled, I asked the schoolmaster, "Why are these men shackled?"

"They are prisoners," he said. "They have been in trouble in their villages in the hills and sent down here to the prison for punishment." He added, "They get paid."

"What are their crimes?" I asked.

"Theft is the most common."

"Do they get long sentences?"

"No. Three or four years only."

"It seems a long time for thieving," I observed.

"Not long," he said.

At various points, guards sat in shelters nursing their guns and yawning in the mid-day heat. The prisoners toiling in the sun all seemed young—fine-looking young men some of

them. Somewhere up in the blue hills in the near distance were their cool villages. It all seemed a very great pity.

We walked back along the road and into the broad dusty main street of the town and stopped at an Indian trader's café for cold drinks. I have forgotten now what part of India he came from, although he told me, and he spoke remarkably good English. He liked to know that I had travelled extensively in India and that I came from London. It was a fine thing, he said, to be able to travel the world; here—looking out into the dusty street—it was only possible to dream.

"Shall you go back to India one day?"

"Who knows? It takes a great deal of money."

He would not take any money for the drinks, or for some sweets we had. No, no, it had been a pleasure, an honour. He would not hear of it. There was suddenly no more to say. A sudden desolation swept me, because he had been kind and no return could be made, and there was only one word left to say, and that one sterile.

"Then it's goodbye," I said, my heart quite unreasonably heavy.

"I think it is goodbye," he said, "since we have no chance of meeting again."

Somehow, that, too, seemed a pity.

We returned by a different road and came to the pagoda two miles out of Lashio. It has blue crocodiles at each side of the steps up to it, their heads resting on the platform, pink jaws open, their tails trailing down to the bottom of the steps. The pagoda is golden, surrounded by little white pagodas; their spires are of gold and hung with bells that tinkle in the wind. At the base of each of these little pagodas there is the name of the donor. The view from the platform across open country to the distant hills is very beautiful, but it is with Lashio as with Maymyo, the scenery is all in the distance.

We were back among the noise and squalor of Lashio by three o'clock, and it occurred to me that if I could get transport I could reach Kyaume that evening. I asked Rosie to tell the driver first to take them all home and then to take me to the Residence. She reported back, "He will take you to the office. At this time there is no one at the Residence."

At the office, on the first floor of a wooden house, I was shown into the Assistant's office.

"Did you enjoy the hot springs?" he inquired.

"Thank you, yes, but now I would like to leave for Kyaume, since there seems nothing further to see in Lashio."

"You wish to go to Kyaume?"

"If the Sub-Divisional Officer can put me up. I would be glad if you would telephone him for me."

"There is no telephone at his house."

"Isn't there one at his office, then?"

"It is not necessary to 'phone him."

"It would be better."

"It is difficult."

I suppose I should have persisted, but it seemed to me evident that there was to be no telephoning, so I switched to transport.

"Can I have a jeep this afternoon?"

"When do you wish to go?"

"As soon as I can have a jeep. In an hour, half an hour, at once."

"It would be better in the morning. Now it is difficult."

"Very well, then. In the morning. Tonight I should like to go to the *pwé*, if you can send a jeep."

"I will tell the driver to come at seven o'clock."

"Thank you, and what time in the morning?"

"At seven o'clock."

"I am much obliged to you."

"Don't mention it."

Before returning to the house on the hill I had a look at the town. The mosque at close quarters proved to be new and garish. Behind and above it there is the market place, and above that, as the road winds round, the squalor of the back streets, with cows nosing among the garbage, and the usual miserable pariah dogs. The houses here are of a shanty-town wretchedness. In the main street down below all is loud, lively, crude, with radios loud-speakered from open-fronted shops, clanging bicycle bells, rattling lorries. There are Chinese shops and Indian shops, and everything looking as though it had been thrown up hurriedly for a film set. Lashio got the first

Japanese bombs in 1942, and as with Mandalay such buildings as there are are post-war and have a jerry-built look. For the rest Lashio is a conglomeration of flimsy wooden houses with corrugated iron roofs, huddled in a setting of great beauty.

There was no police escort back to Kyaume. The driver and I set off on our own at seven in the morning. This enabled him to pay various calls at houses on the way down. I began to have misgivings. In Hispaw there was a long halt at his brother's house; the driver had no English but the brother had a little; he came out to the jeep and invited me in, 'to take coffee'. We sat at the back of a large open-fronted café, beside a low platform bed where the brother's wife and two obstreperous young children were encamped. There was a good deal of conversation in Burmese, and then the wife suddenly addressed me in English.

"You like to see Môgok ring?"

I said, startled, "No, I don't think so—not particularly."

The brother then spoke in English.

"Môgok rubies very famous. When the American soldiers are here all the time they say Môgok ring, must have Môgok ring." He took off his ring and handed it to me. It did not seem to me to be of any great beauty and I handed it back.

The wife said, "You do not like to see Môgok ring? Americans like very much."

I got up. "I am not interested in jewellery," I said, "and I am not American." I turned to the driver and jerked my head in the direction of the road. "Come!" I said.

He was just lighting his third cheroot since we arrived, but he sprang up instantly. He looked startled, even guilty, pulling on his old felt hat as though he had not a minute to lose.

We reached Kyaume without any further delays and drove up to the honeysuckle-clad house. A young girl came out as the jeep drew up and the driver spoke to her, whereupon she addressed me in English.

"The Assistant-Resident is in Lashio," she said.

My heart sank.

"Will he be back today?"

"I do not know. Will you come in, please? I will find out."

I followed her into the lounge. She indicated a wicker arm-chair and a table spread with magazines.

"Auntie—please sit down."

I thanked her, but when she had gone I went outside to the verandah, trying to think what to do. If the Assistant-Resident was not coming back that day I could either go back to Hsipaw and ask U Laik to put me up, which I felt sure he would, or push on to Maymyo. I felt disinclined to go back even part of the way.

When the girl returned she said no, her father would not be home till tomorrow. I asked her if she would tell the driver in that case to take me on to Maymyo. The driver replied to this request that he had no authority to take me beyond Kyaume. I said that I would telephone the Commissioner's office at Lashio, and we descended the slope of the garden to a hut where there was a counter, a telephone, a chair. The girl explained to the clerk that I wished to telephone the Commissioner's office at Lashio for permission to take the jeep on to Maymyo. I thanked her and she left. The clerk put through the call. There then ensued a long wait. When at last the call came through he answered it, spoke a few sentences in Burmese, then hung up.

"You must get a taxi in the town," he announced.

I was suddenly very angry.

"Look," I said, "I have no intention of getting a taxi. Get me the call again and I wish to speak to the Commissioner's office myself. I wish to speak to the Commissioner's personal assistant," I added, severely.

The clerk looked at me.

"Please?" he said.

"Do you speak English or don't you?" I demanded.

"No. Not much English. I fetch the chief clerk."

He went out and I paced up and down the empty office for what seemed a very long time. Finally when still no one came I went out to try and find someone. After a little longer a young man came towards the hut. He smiled pleasantly.

"I am the chief clerk. Can I help you?"

"I want to telephone to the Commissioner's assistant at Lashio," I said.

"With pleasure. Please sit down."

I sat and he put the call through. Then he went away. Nothing happened. Eventually I went outside again and presently I saw the other clerk advancing.

"Where is the chief clerk?" I demanded.

"He has gone for his breakfast."

I went back to the office with him. Now, I thought, we will start from scratch. Holding myself in at all points I said, speaking very slowly and clearly, "*Will you please get me the Commissioner's office at Lashio?*" Then I stood by him to snatch the receiver from him the moment the call came through.

It did come through eventually. I took the receiver and asked for the Commissioner's assistant.

"The Assistant Resident is not here," I told him, "and I am stuck for transport. The Attorney General in Rangoon wired the Commissioner to render me all possible assistance and I am asking to be allowed to go on to Maymyo in the jeep that brought me here. Can you hear me?"

"Yes. I understand. But I cannot spare the jeep. I need it this afternoon."

"You have a whole fleet of jeeps!"

"This is a private one. It must return. I am sorry. You must get transport in the town."

My patience was suffering the fate of the late Herr Hitler's.

"I am in this country as the guest of a government organization," I said, "and it's not my business to go wandering around in taxis!"

"I am sorry I cannot help you."

"Then what do you suggest I should do?" I demanded, bitterly.

"Perhaps the Township Officer would help you. You can tell the driver to take you there."

"Incidentally," I said, "you didn't send him last night to take me to the *pwe*."

"I told him to come," was all he said. I hung up.

I turned to the clerk.

"Please tell the driver the Commissioner's assistant says he is to take me to the Township Officer, then return to Lashio."

"You wish to go to the Township Officer?"

"I wish to go to the Township Officer. Please tell the driver."

We went back up the slope and found the driver and he

was given the good news. Back in the jeep I wondered what I would do if the Township Officer should also prove to be in Lashio.

Fortunately he was at home. He was at home and he spoke excellent English and was cordiality itself. He would get in touch with the police and arrange for me to go to Maymyo. I would need an escort. Unfortunately his own car was being repaired and he did not think it would be ready in time, but he would arrange with the police. But I must excuse him asking me, please, but had I had my breakfast? I replied that I had had *chota-hazri* at six-thirty. Then I must eat. He would arrange this. I asked if in the meantime I might wash, for I felt the dust of the Lashio road thick upon me. He called his wife, who organized the bringing of water to the verandah. I was given a meal of egg-and-bacon and tea, and when it was over the superintendent of police had arrived, and others of the police, and two jeeps, one containing the armed escort. I told the Township Officer that I could not thank him sufficiently, but he waved all thanks away.

At one point along the road we stopped at a police barracks and picked up another young man with a gun. There was a point along the road considered a 'danger spot', I gathered. Two roads forked at an island, and there had been trouble there recently. As we approached it the driver of the escorting jeep accelerated and we hurtled through. Various lorries passed on the way up to Lashio, drowning us in dust, and hooded bullock carts moved through their own dust in the tracks at the sides of the road. In the late afternoon we came to Maymyo and the tall eucalyptus trees.

And there was U Ba Tu and his wife, and Margaret and Marie and Rosalene and Dolly, and little Wendy and Pearl, smiling and welcoming.

"You said I could come back," I said.

"It is very nice for us," they said.

"It is lovely for me," I assured them. "It's like coming home," I added, because that was how it felt.

THE SAVAGE AND ENCHANTED: MINGUN

I GOT back to Maymyo on a Friday and had a weak longing to stay there in the coolness until the Monday, but when I telephoned U Ba Maung in Mandalay he said he had a river trip to Mingun arranged for Sunday morning, starting at seven o'clock, so that I must be back in Mandalay the next day. He would send a car for me in the afternoon.

It was a bad moment when I got into the car and looked my last at the Ba Tu family assembled in the compound to say good-bye. All over again that feeling—"Shall we ever meet again?" The continual severing of brief attachments is all part of travel anywhere, but when the attachments are between East and West the chances of meeting again are so remote that the farewells are often more than vague regrets; it can be as though one left a part of oneself behind with each parting. But there was nothing for it. The car turned out of the compound and into the eucalyptus avenue; there was the final glimpse, the final wave, then we were running out of the town, once again on the long dusty Mandalay-Lashio Road.

And once again the incredible beauty of the hill scenery between Maymyo and Mandalay, the earth quilted with wooded hills, range upon range, in all directions, above the wide deep valleys. And everywhere at the sides of the road blue flowers like drifts of bluebells, only they flourished in sun and shade alike. At various points soldiers were stationed on crags above the road, solitary sentinel figures with rifles standing protected from the sun under a bamboo thatch, guarding the route.

The road zigzags down the three thousand two hundred feet to the burning plain. Then we are again among the paddy fields, with the small white storks, the 'paddy birds', perched

on the ridges, and the flame-of-the-forest trees shedding the last of their scarlet lilies into the deep dust of the road. We stop at one point and buy baskets of strawberries from Ghurkas at the sides of the road, at half a *kyat* a basket. Later we stop again and buy bundles of asters, roots and all; they, too, are very cheap. They are wrapped up for us in big cool plantain leaves.

Then at last the forty-five miles is completed, and we are back in Mandalay and running along beside the moat, the old red walls aglow with the sunset. It comes to me that this surely is one of the most beautiful sights in the world, comparable to the Shwe Dagon and the Taj Mahal—the walls of Mandalay as the sun goes down.

In the cool of morning we left for the government launch tied up in the river below the steep bank of loose dust which constitutes the quay side. U Ba Maung had put on European clothes and shoes. Descending that unpleasant embankment in my Burmese slippers I realized that he had reason. To reach the launch it was necessary to cross a plank projecting from the side of the embankment on to the iron-topped hold of a barge. It was a narrow plank at a height of about twelve feet, and I did not much care for it, but as U Ba Maung, who is big and heavy and elderly, marched on to it without fuss I could hardly do otherwise myself.

Our host for the occasion was a well-to-do rice miller. I was never clear who was who in the party, but there were young girls with their faces covered with *thanaka*, and flowers in their hair, and there was a young Burmese boy wearing an American shirt depicting bathing beauties, racing cars, the Manhattan skyline, news-print. Such shirts, it seems, were popular with the American air-force, and now, alas, are popular with young Burmans. The adult male members of the party were more soberly gay in green and grey silk *longyis*. It was a very animated party; everyone seemed to talk at once, but the men's voices were the merest accompaniment to the shrill starling-chatter of the women. The launch consisted of a lower deck, with a galley, where our host's servants busied themselves preparing a meal, and an upper deck with a very narrow deck space surrounding a fair-sized cabin, furnished with a table and chairs, and leather couches at each side under the windows.

At ten o'clock the landscape was hazy with heat, and the wide river the colour of mist. There were a number of sunken ships, some heeled over on to their sides, others with their masts and funnels thrusting up, souvenirs of the British retreat in 1942. There were occasional junks with curved brown sails, and drifting bamboo rafts with their little huts in the middle. The landscape was flat and dull, first with paddy fields, and then with semi-desert down to the river in long desolate stretches of pale sand. Near Mingun hills began to loom up, dotted with the white cones of pagodas, and the land above the low cliffs of the river was green and cultivated, with sweet-corn and ground-nuts. At one point along a tow-path women were hauling boats heavily laden on the river below.

The launch moored off an embankment covered with ground-nut plants and opposite a shuttered wooden *pongyi-kyau* shady among palms and plantains, with tall, thickly blossomed mango trees crowding close. There was a great twittering of birds. Through the trees beyond the monastery could be glimpsed the enormous haunches of the colossal lions guarding the unfinished pagoda, which, though less than a third complete when King Bodawpaya who initiated its building abandoned the work on it, is reputedly the largest mass of brickwork in the world. It was begun in 1790 and the building continued for nearly thirteen years. By that time the two colossal lions had been finished, five walled terraces, and the square base of the pagoda. The lions were ninety feet high, with claws of white marble three and a half feet long; the eyeballs were also of white marble and were three and a half feet in diameter. The outside wall of the pagoda was six hundred and seventy-seven feet square, and the base of the pagoda two hundred and fifty-six feet square. In 1838 an earthquake wrecked the lions and split the unfinished building in several places.

But, unfinished and falling into ruins though it is, this Mingun Pagoda is an astonishing sight, its colossal square bulk looking across a wasteland of dust, where cattle wander among the thorn bushes, to a belt of trees from which emerge the great stone cliffs which are the haunches of the lions—all that is left of these mammoth figures. A track crosses this savage and enchanted place and along it covered bullock waggons pass

from time to time in a cloud of dust. The ruined building contains a shrine, reached by steep flights of broken steps. Vultures keep watch in this strange wild place, perched in the flame trees, their blackness almost brilliant against the scarlet flowers. These flowers are sometimes dried and used in soup.

A short walk through the dusty wilderness stands another strange pagoda, all white, with tiers of crenellated terraces intended to represent the fabulous Myin-Mo mountain of Buddhist mythology. The successive tiers are fitted with niches which originally contained marble images of members of the celestial hierarchy. Very steep steps lead up over the tiers to the gleaming white pagoda itself. At the bottom of this Jacob's Ladder of a staircase two grotesque stone figures squat under a tree; they are the guardian spirits of the trees—"like your nymphs," explained a Burmese young lady with a gaily painted sunshade.

Close by is the great bell for which Mingun is famous. It was cast in 1795 and is reputedly the biggest intact bell in the world. It is twelve feet high and its traditional weight is ninety tons. It is housed under a decaying and gabled roof. There are notices in English and Burmese forbidding 'scribbling', but there is scribbling everywhere, all over the walls of the shelter and even scratched on the bell itself. Various traders have used both bell and walls to advertise their businesses—So-and-so 'the Bengal Tailor', and so on. A visitor to Mingun must obviously see the famous bell, but except that it is reputedly bigger and heavier than any other there is nothing of any great interest attaching to it. It does not stir the imagination like the great brooding mass of brickwork of the unfinished pagoda falling into ruins in its wilderness of thorns.

A little distance away the wooden houses of a home for old people flank a square shady with tall trees. There is a Buddha shrine here with two marble images, gold decorated and with elaborate gold head-dresses in the Siamese manner. In the centre of the square there is an open-sided shelter with a wooden dais where pilgrims to Mingun spread their mats and picnic. On this occasion there was a party of women and children. Prowling hungrily around were the most gaunt pariah dogs I had yet seen, and they were all bitches. If there were any males among them I can only say I did not see them,

and looking at the wretched creatures it came to me that I had heard or read somewhere that in the interests of stopping the breeding of these pi-dogs there had been attempts in some places to segregate the sexes.

Back on the launch an excellent breakfast of rice and various curries awaited us. No one watched us go from this strange place with its foreground monastic peacefulness screening the wild tragic desolation behind. The world holds but a few of these savage and enchanted places. There is Samarkand, centuries older, and Fez which is older still. There is also Pagan, which can compete with both, and which is all that Mingun is a thousand times more.

(XII)

IRRAWADDY STEAMER TO NYAUNGU

IT SEEMED that as an unaccompanied female a Government launch could not be placed at my disposal for the journey by river to Nyaungu, the anchorage for Pagan; I must go by public steamer. I had no objection whatsoever to going by public steamer—indeed it occurred to me that it might be more interesting—but there ought, I felt, to be a more valid reason than the one given for a Government launch not being available. But in this matter of travelling by public steamer, I discovered, it is important to choose the day, and but for a conversation at dinner at the British Consulate in Maymyo I would have found myself in what was vividly described to me as a ‘hell ship’, with only one cabin, and only one latrine, and that deep down in the hold. The Burman who told me this had cancelled his own passage in this steamer, and I took steps to get my own cancelled. It was agreed, when I raised the point, that some of the steamers were ‘not very good’, but I was assured that the one to which I had transferred was all right; there were several cabins, and I could be sure of one, and, yes, I could have it to myself. But I must go on board overnight, as the steamer sailed ‘very early’ in the morning.

In spite of the assurance my heart sank a little when U Ba Maung put on European clothes once more and announced, when the old wall was aglow with sunset, that it was time to go. I had no very clear idea what was to happen when I reached Nyaungu the day after tomorrow. It was vaguely understood that the Sub-Divisional Officer had been, or would be, informed. I was also apprehensive concerning the promised cabin; it would be hot, I thought, and there would be cockroaches—though as to this last, I told myself, morosely, those

who shrink from cockroaches had better not travel in the East, and though the cockroaches in Burma seemed bigger than those in India—some as big as young mice—there were not nearly so many of them. Nor were they as horrible as spiders, against which I had been warned, but of which, so far, I had seen only one—though to be sure it had been the biggest in the world. It was at Maymyo; it was such a monster that despite my horror of these creatures I was fascinated by it and called my host's attention to it. "Did you ever see such an enormous one?" I demanded, gazing in a kind of hypnosis of horror-fascination. U Ba Tu looked up from his newspaper and glanced in the indicated direction. "They are harmless creatures," was all he said, and went on reading.

At the quay it was difficult to make out the steamer or anything else through the great fog of dust churned up by bullock-carts, gharries, cattle, goats, people. U Ba Maung closed the car windows and we gazed out fearfully. The road ran under palm and other trees along the steep cliff of loose dust above the river. When we finally stepped out the commotion was like that on an Indian railway station—a babble of shrill voices and people moving excitedly in all directions, only with this difference, that here most of them held handkerchiefs to their mouths against the incredible dust. I had no idea what happened to my baggage. I merely stumbled blindly along, in the wake of U Ba Maung's portly figure, the hot sand burning my feet exposed in their Burmese slippers. I had tried before starting out—remembering this cliff of dust from the Mingun trip—to put on European shoes, but my feet were so swollen with the heat that I could not squeeze them even into sandals. I had the feeling that I would never be able to wear European footwear of any kind ever again.

When we reached the gang-plank the ship was revealed as a paddle-steamer with a long awning-covered upper deck, and a row of cabins forward. The deck was packed with people encamped on carpets and bamboo mats, with their bedding rolls, bundles, hampers, tiffin-carriers, silver and brass bowls, kettles. Except for the *pong-yis* I was reminded of the time when I had travelled 'deck' myself, fourth-class on the steamer crossing the Caspian Sea from Baku to Krasnovodsk in forbidden Turkestan. But that ship at least had not been a floating

furnace, as this was. The deck of this Irrawaddy steamer was immediately over the furnace room, which was visible through the open door as one ascended the stairs. Quite simply I do not know how the passengers sitting and lying on that deck for days and nights on end survived the terrific heat from below in addition to the heat of the days and nights themselves. It was hot on the first-class deck beyond, but at least it was only the heat of the day itself, no different from the heat ashore, and when the ship got moving it might conceivably be cooler.

There were only four cabins, two at each side, and a very narrow and short strip of deck, its length curtailed by the combined dining-room and lounge in the blunt bows. I found that I had been allotted a sizable cabin with two beds, next door to that of the only other first-class passenger, a government minister. The cabin was extremely hot, but there were not, as far as I could see, any cockroaches. There was anyhow a mosquito net to tuck in. There were no curtains at the windows. I noticed that the minister had already rigged up towels at his windows.

We went into the dining-room and sat down at one of the two tables laid for four and called for cold drinks. There was a strip of rush matting down the centre of the room, and a number of wooden easy chairs. The windows all round and at the end of the room gave the impression of an observation car. The sky was crimson with sundown and the palms were black against it. The shrill babble of voices carried from the quayside. The light would be fading now on the old wall. It was good-bye to Mandalay. I was suddenly sad. U Ba Maung and I chatted in a desultory fashion, as people do whilst waiting for a train to go. Then to my surprise and pleasure Dr. Soni arrived.

"I had your letter," he said, "and I could not leave it unanswered."

"It was good of you to come," I said. He was, I knew, very busy, in various directions.

He smiled his singularly sweet smile.

"I wanted to."

The good U Ba Maung took his leave and Dr. Soni and I continued the discussion which had engaged us after the other members of the group had left on Sunday. We talked for two

hours or so. There were still for me, at that stage, so many points of Buddhist philosophy and teaching in need of clarifying. The discussion might have lasted even longer but that the pleasant young man in whose house I had spent some time when I first arrived in Mandalay arrived with a friend who years ago had read some of my early works never dreaming he might one day meet me. So the Buddhist discussion ended and Dr. Soni rose to go. I walked with him along the narrow deck space past the cabins and said in all sincerity what I have said to very few people, "I will always be glad to have known you." And I added, "Perhaps one day we will meet again in India."

"Perhaps."

Then the firm strong handclasp, and one more Goodbye.

I returned to the two young men, and my eager fan plunged relentlessly into a discussion of English authors, beginning with Joseph Hocking and going on to someone they all called, I found, Mr. Somerset Morgam. It was like an Indian press conference. What did I think of Nevil Shute? Had I read Mr. Maurice Collis's books? What did I think of them? What did I think of American writers? Who was my favourite writer? How long did it take to write a book? My ex-host, who had allowed his friend to do most of the talking, said suddenly, "You look tired."

I assured him I was—very tired.

"I think we should go."

"Yes," I said, and got up. It was ten-thirty, and the day had begun at six. I said goodbye to them with a promise to send some books. So many books one promises to send on a journey of this kind, and conscientiously keeps one's word, but so few are ever acknowledged—if, indeed, they ever arrive.

I went into the hot cabin and switched on the fan and hung towels up at the windows. The bed was the hardest I had ever known even in the East. But at least it was not over a furnace. And there were positively no cockroaches.

The day began at five-thirty with a great commotion of shouting, a clattering of chains, and a general excitement; but we did not cast-off until seven—amid an even greater din, to which was added the clanging of bells.

From the open window at the end of the dining saloon I stood looking out over the wide muddy-looking river, seeing again the sunk ships and the flat heat-hazy landscape. Presently I was joined by a tall white-clad ship's officer who addressed me by name. He was the Chief Engineer, an Anglo-Burman of Irish stock. From him I learned that the broad roofed barge attached to us was a 'flat'. It carried cargo and fuel, which if loaded on to the steamer itself would cause it to sink too deeply into the shallow water, "and we should get stuck on a sand-bank".

In the square bows of the lower deck of the steamer, and in the fore of the flat, Indians stood plunging long bamboo poles into the water and calling the soundings. The poles were marked with black, red and white paint for measuring the fathoms. The course of the channel was marked out with poles through the masts, funnels and hulks of the numerous war-time wrecks. The two Indians called the soundings in turn, each seeming to answer the other, their voices carrying across the water in a high, monotonous yet curiously musical singsong. They ceased when we no longer followed the channel through the wrecks and the sandbanks, but resumed from time to time later in the day when again we ran into shallow water, and water treacherous with sandbanks. At times there seemed nothing in the long hot monotonous day but this rhythmic singsong, like chimes, marking the hours.

At Sagaing we changed our course because of the numerous drifting timber rafts. We lay off here for a time, and eventually were joined by another steamer with a flat attached. Amid a tremendous hullabaloo of clanging bells and shouting the two steamers were lashed together. The Chief Engineer said that later we should pick up another flat. In the meantime we picked up another deck-passenger who came out to us in a sampan and carrying a live cock. Watching the activity on the flat I was suddenly aware that we carried an armed guard of some half dozen young military police. The deck-passengers sat and lay about on their mats and carpets, their pots and kettles and bundles all round them; some were busy eating, others sat and smoked cheroots, others lay reading or sleeping; some merely sat, listlessly, between the heat of the awning and the heat of the deck. I had not seen them come aboard but

there were now two other first-class passengers, a Burmese couple, the man wearing European clothes.

The heat was intense, and it was a relief when we moved again—a small, puffing, chugging flotilla. The river was very wide and the landscape dull, a desolate sandy strand at one side, green banks at the other. This continued for hours, a monotony of desolate pale beaches with a desert emptiness beyond—the dry zone.

Around noon we came to a village, a straggle of dark huts against a background of trees. Gharries moving in a cloud of dust dashed down the steep sandy bank of the waterside to meet the incoming flotilla—but no one either went ashore or came aboard. There was a tremendous babble of voices; bales and packing cases were carried ashore on the heads and backs of coolies or brought on board. More firewood was taken on to the flat. Sellers of sweets and cakes came on board, moving about the main deck. Two young gipsy girls came on board and sang shrilly, choosing a young soldier lying on his back beside the rail to perch beside. He smiled and gave them coins. They were young, pretty, gaily impudent. I also gave them coins, and they sang again. They tried to collect again from the soldier, but this time he merely laughed and waved them away.

In the dining saloon the government minister was having a late breakfast. Two orderlies hovered in solicitous attendance. One buttered his bread for him, the other jammed it. The moment his cup was empty it was refilled. Flies were flicked from the table the moment they alighted. A glance from the ministerial eye was sufficient to cause this to be passed, that to be removed. Not a word was spoken. The faces of the orderlies were impassive, and the minister seemed not to see them. He was youngish, heavily built, sombre of manner. Later we made each other's acquaintance—in a disinterested sort of way. I learned that he was not long recovered from a fever and had 'to take things easy', which was why he was going down to Rangoon by boat. He came from a village in Upper Burma—"where the people are not so educated, because the British took it over much later." This was anyhow a new angle on the annexation. Although he was a member of the government there was still something vaguely peasant about him. Back in Rangoon I learned that he had been an active leader in the

Indonesian struggle for independence, where he had proved himself a man of great courage and initiative. But of this he said nothing to me—indeed, though we ate at the same table we did not have a great deal to say to each other.

Towards evening the river made a huge bend and we passed sand-flats, and fishing-boats with dark brown sails. The sun went down in a crimson globe behind a group of palms and a cluster of white pagodas. Mist rose from the river in a long low stratum, like cloud. At six o'clock we reached Myingan, where we were to tie up for the night—for Irrawaddy steamers never travel after dark. The town itself is actually some miles from the river; what we came to was a row of bamboo houses along the top of a high quay built of stone and cement. There was a smell of dust and of frying food, and the indefinable smell of wooden houses which is the smell of Burma. A number of steamers were moored below the high grey wall. Bullock-carts and gharries moved in a trail of dust along a sandy cliff beyond the quayside. People gathered to watch the steamers tie up, their *longyis* vivid against the paling sky. In the background women walked out of the picture, towards a towpath, with baskets and bundles on their heads.

A party of about a dozen men came aboard to meet the minister. And a letter was brought on board 'for the British lady-writer travelling from Mandalay'. This much was set forth in English; the rest was in Burmese. The minister translated for me that the Sub-Divisional Officer of Nyaungu had been notified of my impending arrival, and that the peon who bore this letter would spend the night on board and escort me when we arrived at Nyaungu sometime tomorrow afternoon.

The minister received impassively and with few words the people who had come to see him. He ordered cold drinks, in which hospitality I found myself included, though I sat tactfully apart. The party sat round in a semi-circle and regarded the minister. Very little was said. Occasionally someone would ask a question and the minister would briefly reply, then there would be silence again. The Burmese are very sensible in this—I observed it time and again—that when there is nothing to say they preserve an unembarrassed silence. They are free of the European compulsion to produce words at all costs. The party had come aboard to see the minister, to

have their *darshan* of him; very well, they were seeing him, they were having it. A *darshan*—I learned from India when my daughter and I were sometimes the objects of it—does not call for conversation.

After about half an hour they took their leave, as quietly and gravely as they had come; they bowed to the minister and he to them. They had barely gone when a doctor entered the saloon with a black bag and took out apparatus for measuring the minister's blood-pressure. The conversation was in English. He instructed his patient that he must not eat meat. The minister received the news impassively, and when the doctor was gone and the meal was served helped himself liberally to curried mutton. "One must eat," he observed.

Millions of insects swarmed round the lights and fell dead on to the tablecloth and into our hair. The minister ordered the windows to be closed and more fans to be turned on, and the insect spirals lessened. When we had eaten we sat a long time over green tea, in silence. Presently the minister got up and disappeared, without a word. I went out and leaned a while on the narrow deck, until I noticed that here too the insects spiralled round the lights and that the deck was covered with their corpses. I retreated to my cabin, which was after all no hotter, and where there was at least a mosquito net.

We untied at six-thirty in the morning, but an hour later we were still anchored. The floor of the dining saloon seemed to be covered with chaff—which on examination proved to be dead insects. The Indian sweeper came in with a bunch of twigs tied to a short broomstick and flicked the strip of matting and the floor, keeping one hand behind his back the while. In this fashion the dead insects were gathered into a heap in a corner. He then squatted, broke off a twig from his besom, and poked, energetically. There was, I discovered later, a small hole in that corner, through which he had poked and pushed the mess of insects out to the narrow deck beside the cabins, where, presumably the wind took over and dispersed them. He then went out and flicked at the strip of matting along the deck.

The day continued much as the day before, with endless desolate sandy strands shelving to the wide shimmering dun

of the water. At one point a war-time wreck lay like a huge whale across the channel. The Indians plunged their measuring poles and chanted, monotonously. The river made such tremendous bends that at times it appeared like a lake, with the farthest shore approaching. But always the endless sand shelving to the water. From time to time far away on a shadowy hilltop the white cone of a pagoda seemed to float on the misty sky like a mirage. Sometimes the dead shore came to life with a bright greenery of ground-nuts and maize, topped by tall palms, like a desert oasis, and there would be small white pagodas. But it all slipped by and the sand took over again, so that the steamer seemed to be chugging across a desert. We had a flat at each side of us now, but had left the other steamer behind.

At the next halt, Pakokku, women came on board selling tablecloths and tea-cloths and huge gaudy, crudely painted papier-mâché toys—dolls, elephants, owls. The town is some three miles inland from the row of huts by the river. Cotton is grown in the district, and it is famous for its toddy-palms. There was a great loading and unloading and commotion.

We went on again past low sandy cliffs, but topped now with the bright green of cultivation. The hills were shadowy in the distance. There were occasional sandbanks visible in the river.

The butler announced the meal. He also presented his bill, together with a book in which various passengers had written their appreciation of his services. There was also a Complaints Book. In the butler's book I wrote in praise of his courtesy, his efficiency, his catering. In the Complaints Book I suggested that cabins be supplied with curtains. . . .

Then, suddenly, we were at Nyaungu, moving in towards a cliff of sand. The peon appeared and although I did not know what he said I gathered that we must go—at once. He seized my suitcase and typewriter from the cabin and we picked our way through the crowded confusion of the main deck and struggled down the stairs and on to the flat. The heat under the corrugated iron roof was terrific, and it was as crowded there as on the steamer deck, with people sitting and lying everywhere on their mats and carpets and surrounded by their bundles,

kettles, tiffin-carriers, bowls. Here, too, were a great many *pongyis*. A pony, a cow, and a calf, were stalled at the far side; another pony was stalled at the opposite side. There was a long wait, and as the only European, female at that, and alone, I attracted a great deal of attention. I sat down on my suitcase and attempted to assume the impassive air the minister had exhibited in all circumstances. A *pongyi* standing by me stared fixedly, and when I looked up he smiled. I was grateful for the smile, in all that impassive staring.

Suddenly there was an influx of Indian coolies along the gang-planks—the beautiful Indian faces once again—and the peon seized my suitcase and pressed forward. The slope was steep and the peon went at a great pace, despite the heavy suitcase. I found that I could not keep pace with him in Burmese slippers on that steep bank of loose sand; I kept losing the slippers, and then in desperation I snatched them off—only to find that the sand was so burning that it was agony to walk barefoot on it—though plenty of people were doing so. But they had been going barefoot on hot sand from childhood. There was nothing for it but to plunge on. I was convinced that my feet would be blistered, and was astonished, afterwards, to find that they were not. So much barefoot walking in the past month had evidently hardened them to some extent.

At the top of the burning slope there was a dusty road and tall trees, and gharries. The peon chartered a gharry and we climbed in, sitting back to back, the peon beside the driver, and drove off through what seemed a veritable sandstorm of dust to the office of the Sub-Divisional Officer.

The gharry stopped in front of a high wooden house with steps up to a low wooden verandah. I stepped into a room where there was a long table, chairs, benches. There were several young men and a middle-aged man—the Sub-Divisional Officer. Young children darted in and out.

I had various points to settle with the S-D.O. There was the question of accommodation for the night; of transport for Pagan; and transport for Chauk—which I must reach in order to get the 'plane for Rangoon.

The S-D.O. suggested I should stay at the Circuit House at Pagan, specially built, it seemed, for the Prince of Wales when visiting Pagan in 1910. It would cost me thirty rupees

a day. That is to say over two pounds a day. Apart from the thirty rupees I felt that I could not be marooned out there alone in the Circuit House among the ruins of old Pagan. Once there, too, how would I ever get transport back to Nyaungu or on to Chauk? I would be stuck there, I said. No, no, I could not stay out there. There was a bungalow here, he then said, I could stay there and tonight I could dine with him. When I said that I had no bedding or mosquito net he agreed that the bungalow was out of the question. Finally he said that I could stay in his house. "You may not be very comfortable—there are children——"

I said that I did not mind children. What I minded was being marooned in circuit houses and bungalows, with or without benefit of bedding. I thanked him and said I would like very much to stay in his house. And now arose the question of transport for Pagan today, and for Chauk tomorrow. I could perhaps have a jeep for both occasions.

He said, "I have no transport of any kind. People are always being sent to me from Mandalay to visit Pagan, and I have no transport. Some people were sent to me recently, but I could not help them."

I thought, desperately, "But you are going to help me. *There is going to be transport.*" There *had* to be transport.

"Then what do you suggest?" I asked. "I have to get to Chauk tomorrow."

"You can go by the public 'bus."

"No," I said. A few days ago insurgents had boarded a public 'bus and held the passengers up with guns and daggers and collected from them. But it was not only that. I had the feeling that if I persevered, held my ground—as I had done at Kyaume—a jeep would be forthcoming. East of Suez it does not do to take no for an answer except in the very last resource.

"Then," he said, "you can charter a 'bus to yourself. A 'bus for sixty people. With a police escort."

"That would be absurd," I said, and persisted, "Surely somewhere in the town there is a jeep I could charter?"

"There is one jeep," he told me. "But the owner will not let it go to Chauk. The road is bad."

I had been told this on the boat. I thought that the minister had meant because of insurgents, and I thought that if it was

bad for a jeep to travel that road it must be equally bad for a 'bus.

"We could ask him," I said. "Perhaps with a police escort."

"It is no use to ask him."

There was such finality in his tone that I knew it was useless to persist.

"Very well, then," I said. "I will go by the public 'bus. But now for Pagan—surely the owner of the jeep will allow it to go there?"

"If it has not gone somewhere else."

If it had—did it mean I had made the journey to Nyaungu for nothing? I refused to consider the idea. One step enough for me. The S-D.O. sent his clerk out to find out about the jeep, and a servant brought tea and sweet cakes. I began to feel sorry for the S-D.O. I said that when I met the Prime Minister at the end of my trip I would tell him of the predicament of the S-D.O. of Nyaungu harassed by visitors for whom he had no transport.

The clerk came back with a jeep and driver. The S-D.O. was clearly as relieved as I was. The clerk, he said, should accompany me. He gave him some archaeological notes, and we set off through the dust. It was one-thirty. The heat was fierce.

(XIII)

*THE DUST OF A THOUSAND YEARS:
PAGAN*

A LONG straight road, deep in dust, runs from Nyaungu, modern Pagan, the five miles out to the ancient capital. Going and returning there was nothing on that road but a solitary bullock-cart ambling along in the yet deeper dust of a rutted track beside a hedge of cactus, tall and straight, like palisades. Leaving the road at the end of the five miles there are harebells, astonishingly, in the long dry grass; and lying flat to the burning ground, and concealed by the dust, thistles that further assault the bare feet.

There are a hundred square miles of the wilderness of thorn-bushes and scattered trees and pagodas and ruins of pagodas that is ancient Pagan. In that wilderness there are not hundreds but thousands of pagodas—and the building of a thousand years, from the third century to the thirteenth. At the beginning of the thirteenth century Pagan was in its prime, one of the most amazing capitals the world has ever known; at the end of the century it fell to Kubla Khan. It was said of Pagan, in the mid-thirteenth century, that it was 'the most pleasant and beautiful of all kingdoms'. Now goats graze among the broken masonry, and pigeons and bats inhabit the ruined shrines. It is just such a savage and enchanted place as Mingun, but Mingun is small and Pagan is vast.

A Burmese archaeologist wrote of Pagan that 'all conceivable forms of Burmese architecture' are to be found there. The oldest shrine there shows Chinese influence, one shows Singhalese influence, and a number bear a striking resemblance to the temples of Southern India, with flat receding façades tapering to the top. The beautiful white Mahabodi Pagoda, built in A.D. 1215, is, in fact, a replica of the

Buddhagaya Temple of India. This is one of the intact pagodas of Pagan. The *stupa* stands on a massive square platform with satellite *stupas* at each corner and two stepped down below the level of the platform.

I do not remember which pagoda I entered first, or the names of all I entered. I climbed innumerable broken stairs and came out on to broken terraces—sometimes with a touch of vertigo where the masonry of an outer wall had crumbled away and the stairs turned a corner with nothing but the view at one side. But the view over the vast plain was worth the vertigo and the fatigue. It is an astonishing sight, that burning plain with the scattered groups of trees and in all directions pagodas of all shapes and sizes, some complete ruins, some remarkably intact—hundreds of them, thousands of them, stretching away to the glimmering horizon. Yet words fail because they cannot convey the strange, lost, other-worlds-long-ago *feel* of the place.

In the massive doorway of the Kyauk-ku Temple, square and set about with trees, one is confronted with a gigantic Buddha image, rising from floor to ceiling. There are bat and pigeon droppings everywhere and such a desolation that its thousand years seem to have brought the coldness of death to its broken stone.

This strange, sombre temple I remember, and a little third-century pagoda perched at the edge of the cliff above the river, the Bu Paya, with a tiny *Nat* shrine, like a doll's house, at one side. This pagoda I remember because of its position above the river, and because of some charming children who had gathered there from some nearby houses; they followed the visitors round, curiously, and were full of shy smiles, and waved goodbye when we left.

There were children at some of the other pagodas, too, but they were desperately poor looking, thin and dirty, and they came begging. There were a great many such children at the great white and intact Ananda Pagoda, the most easily remembered of all the pagodas, named after 'the beloved disciple' of the Buddha. It is the first temple of Pagan, and is still in use. From a distance it is a square white mass, with a centre *stupa* surmounted by a golden spire, surrounded on terraces below by smaller *stupas*. At close quarters it is almost

church-like, being cruciform, with Gothic arch entrances. But its dazzling whiteness is of the Taj Mahal, and its manner is Indian, with its stepped-back terraces. Its state of preservation is such that it seems incredible that it was built in A.D. 1091. Except that it was very dark inside, with tall standing Buddha images, nothing else do I remember of it except the begging children and the grace of very tall palms against the almost blinding whiteness of its exterior, and a kind of bewildering beauty. According to tradition it was designed by four famous Indian architects whom the king was testing to discover the best. Their merits proved equal and the entrances they designed were uniform. When the pagoda was completed the king had all four executed so that their work should remain unique. (This tale of tyranny and death is basically the same as that related of the fountain in Flecker's *Hassan*. . .)

I remember the square Thatbyin-nyu Pagoda, built by King Alaungsithu in A.D. 1144, and climbing terrace after terrace of the Shwesandaw, the pagoda of the golden hair relic, and looking out in awe and wonder at that incredible wilderness blossoming with pagodas. There was again that feeling I had experienced at the first sight of the Himalaya from Darjeeling—of wanting to gaze and gaze, of never being able to look enough at such unimaginable splendour. And the troubled sense of looking, perhaps, for the first and last time.

I remember the small square Ordination Hall, built of brick, and oddly like a Quaker Meeting House set down in the sweltering plain, its faded elephant frescoes, and many *Nats* and *devas*. I remember the square Bidagat-taik, the Library, small and dark and empty, with nothing to suggest what it has once been. I remember the ruins of the great gateway of Pagan, huge broken pillars with a niche set in each, housing two guardian spirits, a brother and a sister. These, the small and unimportant things, are easier to remember. There is too much of what is important, and to spend four hours, as I did, entering pagoda after pagoda, ruin after ruin, mounting interminable stairs, parading endless terraces, with aching legs and feet wincing from the hot stone and marble, is merely to become confused, like too many hours spent in looking at pictures in the Louvre. Visually one can see a great deal in

four concentrated hours, but the brain will not hold it. Four days would have been better, with only three or four pagodas a day. But for anyone who wanted a real archaeological survey four weeks would not be enough. But who except an archaeologist would want that? Archaeological reports exist for those who are interested, and some are to be found incorporated in the scholarly works of Mr. V. C. Scott O'Connor.

The Shwe-zigon Pagoda is the only one of the numerous pagodas I visited that hot afternoon of which I was afterwards able to record any detailed notes and it is the only one memory yields up in any detail. Perhaps it is because just as some people like their haystacks round rather than square I prefer my pagodas golden rather than white, and the Shwe-zigon is bell-shaped and all of gold, like the Shwe Dagon, very beautiful, but not as beautiful as that most beautiful of all pagodas, and perhaps of all man-made structures. But still, it is very beautiful this pagoda which King Anawratha built, like the Shwesandaw, in order to acquire merit for himself and please his people. It was enlarged to its present size in the eleventh century by King Kysansittha, and the space between the original pagoda and the new casing is supposed to have been filled in with jewels, thrown in by the king and his court. It was given a new *hti* in 1767 by King Shinbyushin, who has left a record of the fabulous amount of gold, silver, and precious stones used in its construction. Over a thousand emeralds are included in the list.

In modern times little gilt trees, with their donors' names prominently displayed, encircle the base, and like the Shwe Dagon it is illuminated by the inevitable strip-lighting. There are steep steps up to ledges round the golden pagoda itself for those who wish to add yet more gold, but women may not do this as sacred relics—a tooth and a bone of the Buddha—are buried under. A long white colonnaded rest-house leads up to the main entrance, and in its shade women sit selling joss-sticks, candles and heat-wilted asters, for offering at the shrines, and there are a few beggars—making it possible for the passers-by to acquire merit by giving to them.

I was taken to the famous Circuit House, looking out across grass and trees to the river. Certainly it is in a fine

position, and equally certainly had I agreed to stay there I should have been completely isolated. Looking out from the balcony of the upper storey I saw a village or hamlet, wooden houses among palms and plantains, in the near distance. It seemed astonishing that people could subsist in this wilderness of ruins, and I asked what they did. I was told that they lived by fishing and the making of the lacquer ware for which Pagan had long been famous. I asked to be taken to the village and shown some of the work. Unfortunately the workers had already gone for the day when we arrived there, but I was shown—and purchased, very cheaply—some of their very beautiful work. Sad that when I brought it home it should be assumed to be papier mâché, though this, apparently, is a common misconception. Actually the lac varnish is applied to a finely woven basket work of bamboo, which accounts for the flexibility of the articles. The varnish is collected from the *thi'si-bin* tree, which when in flower is so thickly covered with fragrant cream-coloured blossom that its leaves cannot be seen. The trees are tapped for their sap, which is dark in colour—*thi'si* means wood oil. The tree is not cultivated in Burma, but is plentiful, and grows wild. Its buds are used in curries. Shwe Yoe¹ says that connoisseurs can distinguish between Shan, Nyaungu, and other kinds of lacquer work by the shadow thrown on the inside when the cup or bowl or circular box is held at an angle of forty-five degrees. The work is supposed to be imperishable.

Pagan appears only once in modern history, and then tragically. In 1837, five hundred and fifty years after it fell in all its glory to the Mongol hordes of Kubla Khan, it fell to the British. The Burmese General Zeyathura attempted to hold the British advance from among the ruins, but his men fled when the enemy charged a post on the bank of the river. The Burmese soldiers flung themselves into the river, and three hundred lost their lives. Those who did not drown were bayoneted.

After such a surfeit of pagodas I was interested to discover whether the 'pagoda slaves' mentioned in old books still

¹ In *The Burman, His Life and Notions* (MacMillan, 1895).

existed. It seems that the question is not one which can be answered Yes or No. In the old days the kings gave the captives they made in wars to the pagodas, where they served the monks, acted as 'sweepers', and did all the menial work of the pagodas. They lived in the pagoda precincts, and having been given in this way they and their descendants were bound to continue serving the pagoda for ever, under threat of a curse if they abandoned these duties. They believed, and apparently even today many of them still do believe, that if they leave the pagoda they will contract leprosy. Those descendants of pagoda slaves who break away to the extent of taking work outside the pagodas still serve the pagoda once or twice a week in their spare time. Most of the descendants of the original slaves are still serving the pagodas—as sellers of flowers, joss-sticks, candles. Socially they are still regarded as slaves, and the Burmese do not inter-marry with them; although there is officially no caste system in Burma they are regarded as socially taboo, like fishermen, slaughterers, silkworm breeders. Just as India in independence legislated against the caste system, and officially untouchables are admitted to the temples, so in independence Burma legislated against any social taboo concerning the descendants of the pagoda slaves. But the prejudices of generations cannot be removed overnight by legislation. Legally caste-less Indians cannot be discriminated against in India as untouchables; but untouchability still exists. Legally the descendants of pagoda slaves are no longer socially outcast in Burma, but still the religious superstition exists that a curse will descend upon those who break away, and still the social taboo exists and these people live apart, though I am assured that neither the superstition nor the taboo will survive another generation. I was told of one young man who had defied the superstition and broken away, and there are perhaps others. Officially the stigma attaching to pagoda slaves has been abolished—by proclamation—but a Burman told me, when I asked about their social status, "The actual position is that our path and theirs never cross. They seem to be perfectly happy as they are and I am not sure they want to be anything but what they are. We have never had to draw a line as they always live among themselves. On the other hand, how am I to know if the man who sat next to

me in the cinema last night and lent me a match is a pagoda slave?"

It is the answer which is invariably given in reply to any protest about the inconsiderate treatment of servants—"They do not mind; they do not expect anything else." And in reply to any suggestion that labourers or paddy field workers are badly paid—"They are quite happy; their wants are very small. . . ."

That there should be any section of the community despised or in any way rejected by the rest is as un-Buddhistic as it is un-Christian to 'love' your enemies by dropping bombs on them.

(XIV)

THE DRY ZONE: NYAUNGU TO CHAUK

A BALCONY on a main street is a good vantage point from which to view the life flowing up and down it, and I spent a number of hours leaning on the balcony of the tall wooden house in Nyaungu, both when I got back from old Pagan in the early evening, and again in the morning before leaving.

I removed the dust of a thousand years from my person in the bathing place in a corner of the yard, clumsily struggling out of my European clothes under a dry *longyi* kindly lent me by the Sub-Divisional Officer's wife, and when I had poured sufficient water over myself shuffling off the wet *longyi* under a dry one. The difficulty of the performance was increased by an acute awareness of the heads of a number of interested spectators—women and children—bobbing over the surrounding fences. It is not easy to assume the requisite air of nonchalance in such circumstances whilst attempting to keep the dry *longyi* in place, modestly across one's bosom, whilst with the other hand attempting to free oneself of the wet one clinging—two dripping yards of it—to one's body. Burmese women and girls manage it in public—very often at street pumps—as casually and gracefully as their European opposite numbers pull on or remove their gloves; but they have been doing it at least once a day as far back as they can any of them remember.

However, all was duly contrived without indecent exposure, and I went back across the yard and up a high flight of wooden steps at the back of the house, and having nothing else to do went and leaned on the balcony. The noise was fantastic—a din of crows, Burmese music loud-speakered from a cigarette kiosk under a tree a few yards from the house, the

loud-speaker fixed up into the tree, radio from the house itself, an incessant ring of bicycle bells—it was a fun-fair without the fun. The dust haze, catching the setting sun, was even thicker than in Mandalay. The main street of Nyaungu is deep dust, and it is stirred up all the time by an endless procession of bullock-carts. The S-D.O.'s house faces straight down the long straight road to the river; there are bamboo houses at either side and many trees. The main street goes off at right-angles, with open-fronted shops and cafés and tall graceful acacia trees at each side. The trees are white with dust.

When the light had gone I was called downstairs and shared a meal with the S-D.O. in a high barnlike room. My host and I had very little to say to each other, and remembering that Burmese people do not regard conversation as essential I repressed the European impulse to fill in the silences. Whilst we ate, an extraordinary looking cat came in; it was extremely thin, and had an abnormally long tail, a curious head, and very little fur. 'Cat people' like myself do not easily find any kind of cat completely ugly, but this wretched creature was hideous. It ran under a sewing-machine and crouched there. I averted my eyes and attempted to dismiss it from my thoughts, telling myself that Burmese people are reputedly kind to animals, so that someone would feed it, and that perhaps anyhow it was not as starving and miserable as it looked.

A number of men began to drift in to see the S-D.O., so that when the meal was finished I took my leave and went back to the balcony. I was joined there, briefly, by my hostess and a young daughter, but as they had almost no English the conversation dissolved in regretful smiles, and I was alone again. The crows were silent now, and the radio in the house off, and now there was only the occasional ring of a bicycle bell and the even less frequent jingle of bullock-cart bells. There were no street lamps; the only lighting was from the open fronts of the tea-houses. At the café opposite a solitary man sat, in the white light of the strip-lighting. An occasional figure in a *longyi* seemed to flit like a pale moth across the arc of light, to be lost again in the hot dusty dimness from which it had emerged. Eventually even the radio ceased. The man

left the café and when he had gone the street was empty except for the pariah dogs disputing possession of a low broken wooden platform at the side of the road. I went back into the room, at the far end of which I had been provided with a camp bed and a mosquito net. At the other end of the room, where the stairs came up into the room, I had been provided with a commode and a screen. The screen concealed the commode from the view of anyone stepping through the doorway of the adjoining room, but not from anyone ascending the stairs. Well, I told myself, peering over the banisters to see were the stairs free of traffic, you cannot have everything. I was in fact very grateful for my two corners. That circuit house at the edge of the wilderness must be very lonely after dark.

As in Rangoon, I was wakened by the crows as soon as it was light. I put on a wrapper and went back to the balcony, to lean again until such time as water should be brought. The procession of bullock-carts had started again; some were hooded over with bamboo matting, but most had the covering rolled back at that early hour. There was a procession, too, of women with baskets heaped high with firewood on their heads, or carrying it in panniers attached to a bamboo pole across the shoulders. Both they and the bullock-carts went down a turning a little way up the main street, presumably to the market. A woman passed carrying on her head a bundle of bamboo poles with the leaves still attached. There were a number of men about, but none carried more than a brief case or a sheaf of papers. There was the sound of a gong being struck, from a nearby *pong-yi-kyaung* or a pagoda. A crowing of cocks was added to the cawing of crows.

The noise intensified as the light strengthened and Nyaungu got the new day firmly on to its feet. As rapidly as the rising of the sun the cacophony became complete—the clang of bicycle bells, the jingle of bullock-cart bells, a creak of bullock-cart wheels, a persistent hammering produced by a man squatting in the dust under the tree, nailing strips of wood together, watched by another man. There were women going to the market, now, with baskets on their arms, or flat straw trays on their heads. There was an occasional jeep load of

military police swinging into the pavementless street and churning up the dust.

The men strolled mostly in pairs, often with their arms round each other's waists, as in India. Here and there a solitary clerk hurried, importantly, sheaf of papers in hand—the badge of office. The clerks, I noticed, tended to wear topees—another emblem of their high calling. I began to feel that a new beatitude should be added to the *Mahamangala Sutta* of the Buddhist scriptures, which sets forth the Highest Blessings—to be a little local-government official, this the Highest Blessing. In this *Sutta* every blessing is set forth as the 'highest', but assuming the word to mean 'very great' to the little-official beatitude can be added that there is only one blessing higher—to be a big official. Which was worse, I wondered, the flight from the land into industry, as in the West, or into officialdom as in the East?

My reflections were interrupted by a servant bringing water to the balcony. I made my toilet as best I could, wondered whether to pour the water into the dusty potted plants at one end of the balcony, throw it overboard into the dust below, or leave it—and decided to leave it. I went back into the room, dressed hurriedly in my corner, and returned to the balcony to await the summons for *chota-hazri*.

To the right of the tree there was an open space of dust, flanked by the wall of the compound, against which there was a pile of refuse. In the centre of the open space a boy stood looking down at something. He went on his way after a moment and I saw that what he had been looking at was the miserable cat of the night before. It lay there on its side in the dust, its back legs twitching convulsively. A young *pongyi* came and looked, and after a moment went on. I stood watching, wondering should be done, whether the people of the house should be told, whether it was their cat. After the *pongyi* had gone on his way it no longer moved. I watched for some time but it did not move again. Then a couple of pariah dogs came and prowled round it, warily, and sheered off. Another dog came and sniffed at it and ran off. I turned away. The miserable creature was no doubt better dead. Useless to brood upon what it had endured before it dragged itself out there to die in the dust. Better to go downstairs and perhaps

find the S.D.O. and find out what time the public 'bus departed and where from.

My hostess came through from the kitchen quarters as I entered the room. Beyond here, in a room opening on to the compound, there was a charcoal fire on the ground, and servants hovering. She invited me, "Take your tea," and we sat down at the table together. A servant placed tea things in front of her, toast, and an assortment of iced cakes of different colours. The tea came out of the pot complete with milk and sugar; it was very sweet. She passed me the cakes. I took a pink one, telling myself that really there is no reason why one shouldn't eat cakes at seven-thirty in the morning. I had first been offered iced cakes for breakfast in Moulmein and had felt unable to adapt my palate to the idea; but that was now 'in other worlds, long ago'. I had adapted myself to other Burmese customs; why not this one? I dislike sugar in my tea, but here I was drinking it, so why not a pink iced cake to go with it?

When I went back to the verandah the dead cat had been removed. So had the pile of refuse. Dogs came and sniffed at the place where the cat had lain. At least, I tell myself, it did not linger for the vultures to come and pick its eyes out whilst life still remained in its wretched body, which they do with dying cattle. I turned and looked up the street, resolutely switching my thoughts. Bullock-carts laden with firewood, a bullock-cart heaped with gourds, the brilliant green gleaming in the sunlight, a cart laden with bales of some kind of long grass, a cart supporting only a large barrel, drawn by two buffaloes with huge horns.

By eight-thirty the day begins to be hot, and the dust churned up by wheels and feet and hooves has already risen into the air in a light haze. A boy rides up the street on a pony, the young foal following, and suddenly at the cross-roads four ponies appear and in a cloud of dust disappear into the turning opposite so that again I am reminded of the German village in the Caucasus and the sundown gallop of a great drove of horses, long manes and tails flying in the churned-up dust.

In the compound youths sit on the ground stitching teak leaves together with long fine bamboo pins. The leaves so

fastened are used to line deep baskets. The baskets when lined are ranged in a row and a boy goes to and fro with baskets laden with dried plums which he hands to another boy to empty into a lined basket. Behind the row of baskets another boy squats to shake the plums down into the baskets. When all the baskets are filled lids are set on the top of each, and later a young man comes round and stamps the lids with a piece of cardboard inked on one side. A pile of chillies lies drying in the sun.

Immediately below the balcony there is a well with a corrugated iron roof. There is a great busyness of women at the well, this morning as yesterday evening. They come with B.O.C. kerosene cans on poles across their shoulders. One old woman left the well staggering under the weight of her laden cans. In the early morning the water-men come to the well to draw water for distribution to all the houses in the little town. At this house the water is transferred to large pitchers and galvanized iron bins in the compound.

Near the well I saw what I at first took to be an affecting romantic scene going on—a woman with her arms locked round a man's neck; when he moved she moved, without unlocking her arms—the clinging type, evidently, I thought. I was all the more astonished because in the East men and women do not embrace in public. But when the couple moved apart I saw that they were merely two men who had been standing in friendly embrace, as they do in the East. When all wear 'skirts' the sexes are not always readily distinguishable to the Western eye. . . .

The most wretched pariah dogs I saw anywhere I saw in this little town, some of them mere skeletons covered with skin, and so far gone in mange as to be almost hairless. Some seemed lively enough, running round with tails erect; others slunk everywhere, tails between their legs, and snarled when waved away.

By nine-thirty I had had enough of the balcony. The dust was on my throat and smarting on my eyes. I was about to go off in search of the Sub-Divisional Officer when a lorry packed with people under an awning roof turned into the main street and came to a stop near the compound. Poor things, I thought, what a way to travel in the heat. I hoped

they had not to go far. I turned to go into the house when the S.D.O. stepped out of the room.

"The 'bus has arrived," he announced. "Are you ready to go?"

I asked, dismayed, "Is that the 'bus—down there?"

"That is the 'bus you will travel in."

"How very unpleasant for me!"

"You will have the front seat with the driver to yourself. At Chauk you will be taken to the police-station where you can telephone. A police escort has been provided. When you arrive you will give the driver five rupees."

"Is it very far to Chauk?"

"It is twenty miles. But it is a bad road."

There was no room for the boys with the guns in the already overcrowded lorry, so they stood on the running-board and clung to the bonnet, with various out-riders. Some clambered up on to the canvas roof. Inside the lorry it must have been stifling, for in addition to the packed people it was stuffed with bales, bundles, baskets, of all descriptions.

I did not have the seat by the driver to myself, nor, in the circumstances, would I have wished it. On his right the driver had a *pongyi* squeezed in, and on my left I had a girl and her various bundles. The four of us were as close as Siamese twins. The heat from the engine, added to the dust and heat beating up from the road, was fantastic. The iron plates of the truck were burning to the feet. The driver, seeing me constantly moving them, indicated that I should rest them higher, away from the engine, which I did, but it was hardly less hot. And the dust was choking. I have never known such dust; I have never known such heat; I have never known such an aching, burning, choking discomfort. Not even travelling 'hard' on Russian trains; not even travelling 'deck' across the Caspian; for then at least there was not the dust added to all else. Of all my travel experiences it was, to date, the most unpleasant, and there were four sweltering hours of it—for the twenty miles.

The 'bad road' from Nyaungu to Chauk is for the greater part of the way not a road at all. It is merely a track through deep dust. I quite understood why the local jeep owner would not venture his jeep on it. Only a camel could success-

fully negotiate it. It is made still more difficult by not being flat, it goes uphill and down, across desert land and dried-up river beds. It is like crossing sand-dunes, with no way round. Several times we got stuck, the wheels turning in the loose dust and failing to grip. Various people lent their slippers to place under the wheels, and then with a series of jerks and jolts and a good deal of shouting we got going again. Most of the way the landscape was just desert, with cacti of all kinds, and prickly pear, and occasional groups of palms. Occasionally there was an oasis in the shape of a few banyan trees with the usual big wayside water pitchers and mugs on a roofed platform. Then we would halt and some of us would get out and stretch our cramped limbs and drink some of the water or throw it over our sweating faces—or our burning feet. The first part of the journey ran through the wilderness of thorns and goats and ruins of old Pagan, which was at least of interest; but after that it was more profitable to keep the eyes closed against the blinding dust, to keep a handkerchief pressed over eyes and mouth and throat and tell oneself that every journey, however horrible, has an end. Sometimes I would look at the driver, wondering if the dust was hell for him, too, more even than for the passengers, since he could not hold a handkerchief to his face, but he merely stared at the track, his face impassive. Perhaps, I thought, there is such a thing as dust-immunity. . . .

At one point we came to a village and halted whilst the driver and various of the passengers refreshed themselves with plates of rice and curry and little bowls of green tea. We sat at long bare tables under a bamboo roof, and people came, men, women and children, and stared at the stranger, between whom and the children at least there was a social intercourse of smiles and such small games as children can contrive out of nothing but the desire to play. The women smiled, too, but children, of any race, always manage better without a common language than do adults. It was hot under the bamboo roofing, but it was not the enclosed oven that the front of the lorry was, with the engine, and the burning road visible between the burning plates.

We came at last to the river, dim with heat, and dim the landscape on either side, dim with heat and sand, all the

colour drained out of it—the Dry Zone. Mandalay is in the Dry Zone, too, and Pagan, and Nyaungu, but so long as there are trees, however dusty, it is possible to forget it. Chauk does not permit of any such forgetting, with its burnt brown hills and the black pylons of the oilfields. At Chauk we came to a road, deep in dust, but still, a road, not a track. Then there was Chauk itself, a broad dusty street, and everywhere evidences of the Burmah Oil Company.

In accordance with a telegraphed instruction from the Attorney-General when I was in Mandalay I telephoned, from the police-station, to the house of the company's general manager for Chauk.

His wife, answered the telephone.

"We expected you last week," she said.

"I couldn't get here any quicker," I said. "It's a bad road."

At the back of my mind I knew it wasn't the right answer, but the wheels and road were still moving under me. I needed to be somewhere cool, and lie flat, and completely still.

"I will send a car," she said.

A car, said my mind, still full of dust, a car, not a truck. . . .

And then it was not a nightmare of heat and dust any more, but a dream of coolness and beauty. A cool beautiful house perched high above the wide shining river, a garden full of English summer flowers—phlox, marigolds, hollyhocks, and tall bushes of oleanders, overpoweringly sweet—and a whole bed of purple bougainvillea, like a purple fountain, with tall dahlias around. And a green lawn—green—green . . . moist and cool and *green*. It is quite absurd to feel like bursting into tears just because the grass is green. And at the far corner of that incredibly fresh green grass a shady tree, with steps down to a blue swimming-pool.

When I had wallowed for a little while in the soothing steaminess of a European bath, and put on a clean dress with the feeling that there was no luxury in the world more exquisite, I went down the cool polished stairs—it seemed odd to be wearing shoes in the house—and out through the drawing-room, to the garden, and stood under the tree and studied from that blessed shade the burning landscape

which it had been such hell to drive through. There was the usual sandy strand, low sandy hills, the white cone of a pagoda emerging from a group of trees—and distant derricks of an oilfield. I learned later that the oil goes under the river at this point—the major part of the oilfields is on the Chauk side. It was a drained, exhausted, colourless landscape—of pale river, pale sand, dim pale hills. A desert landscape. The Dry Zone. The driest part of it. But such peace here, after the cacophony of Nyaungu. Only the cawing of crows. I sat under the tree and listened to the silence, and watched two houseboys leisurely gathering oleanders. There was the weak feeling—if only one could stay for a few days! But in the morning there was the launch across the river, and one of the little B.O.C. Moth 'planes back to Rangoon, and still more dust on the agenda.

THE ANCIENT MON CAPITAL: PEGU

THE road out from Rangoon to Pegu has for some time rubber plantations on the right and on the left, across flat land covered with a scrub of low bushes, a long shining stretch of reservoir, vaguely like the great Lough Corrib as you come up from Connemara to Galway. At Hlegu we picked up a police escort for the run through lately insurgent areas, where the jungle had been cleared at each side of the road to destroy protective cover for gunmen. Thereafter are only the paddy fields of the great plain in which the ancient Mon capital stands forlornly, like an island from which the sea has ebbed on all sides.

Which is precisely what has happened. Pegu, once a seaport, is now inland. The tide has gone out for good—like Pegu's ancient glory. Today it is a dusty ramshackle little town living like Pagan on its memories, under whose Burmese domination it was for two hundred and fifty years. When Pagan fell to Kubla Khan Pegu was liberated from the Burmese and became again a Mon capital. After that the tables were turned and Pegu made war on Prome and Sagaing, and a series of invasions and counter invasions followed, until the seventeenth century. There is a great mass of mediaeval history attached to Pegu, and it is there in the books, with a great mass of legend as well, for those interested; the chief interest attached to Pegu today is its reconstructed Shwemawdaw Pagoda which when O'Connor wrote of it in 1907 was 'a spire of pure gold', but which was totally destroyed by a severe earthquake in the Rangoon-Pegu district in May 1930. A Burmese writer, Win Pe, graphically describes this disaster¹: 'Buildings collapsed in both towns and a fierce fire raged in the centre

¹ In *The Guardian* (Rangoon), April 1954.

of Pegu, causing heavy loss of life. At 8.45 p.m. the Pagoda trembled, swayed and after terrible sundering noises toppled over like a huge mountain. All that remained was a mound of bricks sliced from the bell-shape south-eastwards to the first terrace below.'

Oddly enough the *chinthes* were not damaged. This was the fifth time the Shwemawdaw of Pegu had been almost completely destroyed by earthquake. Just before and during the Second World War the difficulty of procuring the right building materials held up its reconstruction, but the task of recovering and checking the precious stones of the *hti* was actually completed during the Japanese occupation and the treasure successfully hidden. With independence in 1948 the task was renewed, and on January 12th the first President of Burma drove in the pegs for the work on the base. The Prime Minister laid the foundation stone in April 1951. A Committee was formed and public donations invited. Not only in Pegu but all over the country people gave their money and their jewellery, and many came and gave their labour, as for the building of the World Peace Pagoda outside Rangoon.

The Government voted large sums in order to expedite the work, and the rebuilding was completed on the last day of December 1953. The framework of the *hti* was hoisted into position in March 1954—a few days after my visit—and the *hti* itself was hoisted during the Pagoda Festival in April, with the Prime Minister present, and a great celebration lasting ten days, with the usual *pwe* of open-air dancing and cinema shows, and additionally, in the words of U Win Pe announcing the event, "... circus marquees, Burmese boxing tents, magic shows, cigarette kiosks, restaurants, and long rows of stores displaying quaint articles of Burmese make and wares of East and West."

The Shwemawdaw, too, is famous as a wishing-shrine, so there was all the fun-of-the-fair which the Burmese so greatly delight in—and wishing too, though at a wishing-shrine it is not enough merely to wish; faith comes into it, too, and the wish becomes in the nature of a prayer.

When I was there, although the actual rebuilding of the pagoda was finished, there was still a great deal of building work going on, with cement-mixers and planks and workmen

and lorries everywhere, and the enormous framework of the *hti* could be inspected in a bamboo-roofed workshop, and a model of the gold umbrella itself, which was to be set with diamonds, the gift of a wealthy Pegu donor. Once a *hti* is hoisted the wealth of precious stones with which it is invariably set are never seen again, until such time as it is regilded or replaced. But still it is something to know that the riches are there, poised high in the hot blue air. To know that your pagoda is all of pure gold, with gold and precious stones buried under, and gold and precious stones reaching high and out of sight in the blue sky, and that your few annas have contributed to it all, and perhaps the work of your hands, passing bricks in a long human chain from the foot of the pagoda hill up to the terrace at its base, and that it is all as much yours as those who have given many rupees, all this means very much; it means a share in the general merit of rebuilding.

In a workshop I was shown literally thousands of Buddha images taken from the destroyed pagoda and awaiting re-enshrining. It was a depressing sight, because there were hundreds all alike and of no intrinsic merit, so that it would seem better to have let them remain among the rubble.

There is a very ancient pagoda at Pegu, over a thousand years old. It is reputedly built on the only dry patch of land left when great floods rose and engulfed the plain—though how this squares with the legend that the patch was so small that two birds left on it could only find foothold by the female perching on the back of the male, is not explained . . . The legend of the birds is said to account for the fact that all the husbands of Pegu are henpecked.

There is an enormous reclining Buddha image at Pegu, once in the open, but now under a roof of the usual corrugated iron. Nothing appears to be known about it except its dimensions, which are colossal. It is one hundred and eighty-one feet long from the tip of the head to the sole of the feet, but of the rest of its monstrous measurements I have no note.

The inspector of police who was my host in Pegu was well informed and painstaking as well as hospitable. It is not his fault that I did not absorb more detail of the ancient Mon capital. It was a fearfully hot day and for the first and only time I was feeling sick with the heat—so much so that several

times I had the feeling that I had only to relax my will ever so slightly for the darkness which swam before me every now and then to engulf me, and the heat of the stones on the bare feet seemed at times to aggravate the heat from above.

There was a new ordination hall, vaguely Indian as to architecture, which interested me because of the tombstone of a Portuguese woman who had died there. For a short time, early in the 17th century, Pegu had a Portuguese king, Philip de Brito y Nicote, who at the end of ten years paid for his brief authority with his life, being impaled outside the walls of Siriam, then the chief port of the Pegu district. With de Brito's death Portuguese sovereignty was finished in Pegu.

From the verandah of a small *pongyi-kyau* I looked out over the plain, scattered with ruins, like a small-scale Pagan, but there comes a point at which one cannot take in any more pagodas, and it seems I had reached that point. A swarm of bees, I thought, light-headed with the touch-of-the-sun, a pride of lions, a plethora of pagodas. . . .

JOURNEY BY BULLOCK-CART

IT WAS agreed that in view of my great interest in Mass Education, and of the importance of this scheme in the Welfare State, I should make a tour of some of the off-the-road villages in the Pegu district where Mass Education was operating. Therefore after a long and useful talk with U Aun Min, a program was drawn up by the M.E. Council. The tour was to occupy four days, and the first day was to be devoted to visiting the M.E. Training Centre—about which I have already written—and the model village of Htaukkyant, an hour's drive north of Rangoon.

Htaukkyant stands at both sides of the main road—that is to say, the village proper is at one side of the road, reaching inland, and the bazaar is at the other side of the road. The houses are the ordinary small village bamboo houses, but all are neat and light and each stands in its own small compound, and each has its own latrine at the rear. The latrines are the usual little wooden huts built over pits, but each is equipped with a cement squatting slab, the production of which, for distribution all over the district, is a local industry. These cement slabs are a great improvement on the usual wooden flooring, since they can be swilled down and easily kept sanitary and decent. The village streets are wide, with side guttering, and there is no sign of refuse anywhere, as all is gathered up and burnt. Before M.E. came to the village the streets were only six feet wide and were littered with refuse.

The people are anxious to rebuild the bazaar, with new houses surrounding it, so that the village would be extended, and evenly divided in two sections. The present bazaar is ramshackle, and with its dilapidated thatched roofing highly inflammable. The people were anxious to be supplied with

materials so that they could get ahead with the rebuilding of the bazaar and the erecting of the houses before the rains came. The head man of the village, with various other elders, sought to make it clear to the visiting M.E. officers that they did not ask any loan or gift of the government, but only to be supplied with materials without delay, for which the whole community would pay in instalments when the work was completed. The M.E. officers were sympathetic to the idea, but could not promise anything, as the matter had to go through a government department which had numerous other requests to attend to, and the requirements of Htaukkyant would have to take their turn. The villagers were manifestly very disappointed, and I shared their disappointment. It seemed a pity that having created the desire in the people to help themselves the necessary materials for the community projects could not be supplied without reference to a government department, with inevitable delay. My anxious inquiry, "Will they get the materials they need in time to do the work before the monsoon breaks?" was met with the non-committal "If it is possible."

At Htaukkyant there is a village-hall—where I met the M.E. Committee and members of the Women's Section—and an artesian well, for the construction of both of which the people have paid by communal subscription, as they pay for all their communal needs. There is a well-equipped dispensary, with an injection room, which is also used as an infant welfare centre, and when I saw it was full of mothers and babies, with a doctor and a nurse in attendance. There is also a mobile van which visits other villages and carries in addition to medical equipment, books, radio, gramophone records, and cinema films. There is a school, primary and middle, with classes 4, 5, and 6, but the three junior classes were being held in a *pong-yi-kyauing* from lack of space. The school is the usual bamboo building, but with good window space and therefore lighter than the old-style village school where the children bend over their slates in a very poor light, as I have seen, despite the brilliant sunlight outside. When there is enough money and material the Htaukkyant villagers will extend their school.

The following day, with U Ba Wan, Chief Executive Officer of the Mass Education Council, two women M.E.

officers, and two other men, I left Rangoon by train for the village of Htogyi. At the station I was charmed to find on the platform notices commanding passengers SPIT IN SAND BOXES, DO NOT SPIT ON PLATFORM, and CYCLING ON PLATFORM PROHIBITED—though as to this last he would have been a trick cyclist who could have cycled on that densely packed platform.

The train was all one class, third, and it was densely packed, and there was a marked segregation of the sexes. At the end of a hot and dragging hour and a half through uninteresting burnt-up country we reached Htogyi. Leaving the baggage to be piled into tri-shaws we crossed the line and walked across some wasteland to the school, where lunch awaited us.

Members of the local M.E. centre attended the luncheon and there was some vehement conversation. Upon inquiring what it was all about I learned that the villagers were asking for technicians to be sent to help them with the construction of an artesian well, as at present they had to wade through swamp to get to their water. But as with the people of Htaukkyant who wanted to get their bazaar rebuilt before the monsoon broke the people of Htogyi were told that they must take their turn in the queue of matters the central committee had to attend to. The engineers were busy elsewhere; the people must be patient—but they were as manifestly disappointed as the people of Htaukkyant. The frustration of their eagerness for immediate improvement seemed a pity.

Htogyi is a very clean village. Under M.E. inspiration they had some time ago organized village clean-up squads from the local people, from all sections of the community, burying and burning the street refuse—a shining example to such cities as Rangoon and Mandalay, such towns as Moulmein and Mergui.

After the meal there was a three-mile ride by tri-shaw along a dead straight dusty road to the river. The tri-shaw men were each paid twenty-five *pyas*, a quarter of a rupee, for the fifteen-minute journey.

I regarded the river with dismay. It was a long way below the bank—which was a great deal too steep to descend; indeed it was a cliff. Sloping sharply down from the cliff was

a plank of perforated iron, and some several feet below this was the ferry-boat. But what there is no help for one perforce does. We took off our slippers, and the girl of the party went first, with careless confidence. Then her colleague, a good deal older, and fat—she went laughing, as though it were a great joke, and she laughed even more at the business of getting her down into the rocking boat. I followed her, with a nonchalance I was far from feeling, and jumped down into the boat. We all boarded the boat safely—no one fell off into the clay-coloured mud.

But at the other side of the river there was a wide expanse of soft wet mud between us and the perforated iron-plank landing-stage. The boatman and one of our party tucked up their *longyi* and plunged thigh deep into the mud and hauled the boat up to a boat moored at the landing-stage so that the rest of us could step on to the plank. This plank bridge across the mud is very long; when it finally reaches the bank there is a small café under some shady trees and buckets of water beside a pump, where those who have waded through the mud may wash their feet and legs for a few annas. There is also a kiosk where iced drinks are to be had—the ice is kept in sawdust under a tree. Incredibly it comes in from Rangoon every day by train. We sat in the café across from the kiosk and a young man in our party went to and fro bringing iced drinks for the rest of us. If we had each fetched our own—but things are not done like that in the East.

We were now in the township of Kawa, whose wide dusty main street runs parallel with the river. The Township Officer came to greet us. He was young and had good English, so I asked him about the people. They were mostly rice-cultivators, he said; they were poor, they did not get a good price for their rice, but still they were happy. Just now there was a pagoda festival, as a new *hti* was being given to the pagoda. It had cost a thousand rupees. If I would like to see it . . . I would like, so we walked off up the street through the deep dust to where a group of young men stood playing flutes, clashing cymbals, and clapping bamboo clappers, and one young man wearing a felt hat with a *longyi* was whirling round in a wild dance, his bare feet churning up the dust, his eyes rolling. A few feet away the golden *hti* rested on a tri-shaw.

More music came from the direction of a *pongyi-kyaung* lying back from the road among trees. Whilst I stood with the Township Officer watching the musicians and the dancer children came running barefoot through the dust from all directions, as though summoned by a Pied Piper. They gathered round and stood and stared at the stranger in their midst, a mass of small ragged figures with flat oval faces and black fringes. The little girls wore their hair in topknots and looked like traditional Japanese dolls. An old woman pushed her way through the children and came close and peered into my face as though I were a waxwork. Then she fingered a fold of my scarlet cotton skirt, peered at me again and smiled and said something. I smiled back, on my general principle of a smile for a smile. The girl from our party had joined us and I turned to her. "What does the old woman say?" The girl answered, "She says you are beautiful." Later, when we walked away, I asked, puzzled, "Why did the old woman say that? I am not young, and apart from that I must look strange to her." The girl said, simply, "You have fair hair, and a fair skin."

Presently a number of young women all wearing green *longyis* and white long-sleeved nylon *eingyis*—they were members of a women's welfare organization, it seemed—came out from the precincts of the *pongyi-kyaung* and picked up the long ropes attached to each side of the tri-shaw. They formed into two long rows and in this fashion set off to pull the *hti* round the dusty roads of the little town, followed by the musicians, the children, and a great crowd of people. In the evening there would be *pwé*, open-air dancing, film shows, eating booths, all manner of diversions, and the next day the beautiful jewelled golden 'umbrella' would be hoisted to the top of the pagoda.

When the procession was lost to sight, in a cloud of dust down a side turning, we walked back to the middle of the main street where now two bullock-carts waited. We climbed up over the wheels and settled down among the straw on the floor of the cart, the fat lady being hauled and hoisted up with a good deal of laughter. Then we turned out of the dusty little town and headed out across the harvested paddy fields. The bullock-cart was less uncomfortable than I had expected—remembering those of the Indian jungles—but after about an hour the back begins to ache and legs begin to feel cramp.

The paddy fields in the late afternoon sunshine were like the Irish bogs, brown and gold and reaching flatly away to the horizon. There are tracks across them in all directions, as across the bogs. Even when a distant bullock-cart is itself invisible its position is indicated by a trail of dust rising like smoke in the wake of a train. There were occasional clumps of trees, oases of shade in the burning plain. Bullocks and cows grazed the stubble. The bullocks harnessed under the heavy wooden yoke trekked with their heads to the dust, their flanks continually prodded by the driver's whip. Every now and then he whipped them into a trot, which produced shaken laughter and protests from the passengers. But apart from these occasional interludes travel by bullock-cart is slow going. The three miles across the paddy fields took an hour—which earned the driver three rupees, the rate being a rupee a mile.

Hot and dusty, and with aching backs and cramped legs, we finally reached the village of Makyetkyi, where we deposited our baggage in the school building and set out to walk through the neat lanes of this extremely well-kept Mass Education village. These lanes are for pedestrians only; they are wide and raised, with ditches below them at either side, and beyond the ditches small neat bamboo houses, each standing in its own compound surrounded by trees. The trees and high hedges at the bottom of the compounds, at each side of the raised footpaths, give a good shade, and sometimes, with the trees meeting high overhead, the lanes have the effect of long leafy tunnels, their darkness very welcome after the shadeless glare of the paddy fields. The bullock-carts are confined to separate roads, which means that the people can walk the shady paths without being choked by dust; and when the rains come there are the ditches to drain the water away, so that the roads and paths are never made impassable with mud as happens when there is no drainage.

As we neared the end of the long central lane there seemed to be a great cloud of smoke, as though grass was being burnt off. When we came out into the open the cloud was revealed not as smoke but as dust. In the near distance a great crowd of people could be seen moving to and fro in the cloud of dust, and there was a hubbub of voices.

"Is it *pwe*?" I asked.

I was told, "No, not *pué*—they are digging a reservoir. They only began two days ago, and they must get it done in three weeks, before the rains come. The whole village works at it."

When we were close an astonishing sight was revealed. Every family had been allotted a plot to work on, and the plots were already two or three feet deep. The men worked with picks and shovels, and the women and children carried away the earth in baskets on their heads to form the bund of the reservoir. The men pickaxed the soil straight into the big bamboo baskets. They worked energetically and with great gaiety, laughing and talking, shouting across to each other, singing—as though heavy manual labour in the hot evening at the end of the day's work was the greatest fun and the whole thing a novel form of picnic. When people work for themselves, of course, for the communal good, it is fun. It is the first lesson of Mass Education. And everyone worked, hundreds of men of all ages, and an even greater number of women and girls and children—it was not a case of a few enthusiasts working and a crowd of onlookers. The men swung their picks and the women and children went to and fro with the baskets, laden and empty, and the dust rose like smoke against the reddening sky. They would work far into the night, it seemed, for the moon was full and it would be as light as day for hours yet.

The western sky was now one vast crimson arras, facing the rising moon, and the dust-cloud touched by the sunset became a fiery mist. The high footpath under the trees was dusky, and sealed at one end by the curtain of kindled dust, but at the other opening out into the silver-gold glow of the rising moon.

We walked round the bund of the old reservoir, choked with rushes. Women walked far out into it, along a plank, carrying kerosene cans suspended from poles across their shoulders. The tremendous sunset had yielded to the tremendous moonlight when we walked back to the school. Under an open-sided shelter hedged round with plantains and bamboo a long table had been laid for a meal. A big lamp with an incandescent mantle hung hissing from a rafter. There were many willing feminine hands bearing bowls of rice and curries, a movement of bright graceful figures up and down the

wooden steps of the school house behind, shy smiles, and quick friendly glances. All was done, I gathered, by the teachers from the school, and the women members of the local M.E. committee. There was at this gathering no segregation of the sexes; we all ate together, sitting on forms at the long table.

When the meal was over cheroots were lit, and then the head man of the village came, with the village elders, and many others, to meet the visiting M.E. officers and have their *darshan* of the stranger. They seated themselves on forms facing the table, against a background of palms and plantains. The great yellow full moon was now high in the hot dim sky and beyond the compound the world was a flood of silver, with dense black shadows.

There were a number of introductions—to the head man, and various of the committee, after which I was asked to sit at the other side of the table, "so that they can see your face". Only one woman appeared to have come with the head man's contingent. She came and sat next to me, smoking an enormous cheroot. She stared so fixedly that something, I felt, must be done about her. I asked the girl next to me to ask her who she was. I turned to her, smiling, when the question was asked. She said that her name was Ma Hla Sein, and that she was a paddy field worker. 'Hla' means pretty, and she was not pretty, but she had a droll amusing face. She offered me a puff at her cheroot. These outsize cheroots are too big to put in the mouth; they are placed to the lips and drawn on in that fashion, though how it is achieved I have no idea, for my own attempt produced a firework display of sparks, which convulsed Miss Pretty Sein and the villagers with amusement.

After this comic interlude there was no more constraint. Questions began to be asked. The girl M.E. officer sitting next to me said, "They think you are American."

I said, "Well, will you please tell them I'm not!"

She told them in Burmese, then said to me in English, "They don't understand how there can be a difference between English and American since Americans speak English. They say it is the same."

"Tell them," I said, "that English people speak English and Americans speak American-English, and it is not the same. You have been in America. You can explain this."

This, however, produced still further confusion, and raised the question as to whether all white people were English. It was a relief when someone changed the subject by asking if I would tell them something about my own country. Where to begin with that—"England is a cold wet island where it rains all the year round, even in the summer . . ." I asked that they would indicate what they would like to know about my country. The reply was that "they would like to know about farming in your country".

Fortunately, my maternal grandfather having been a farmer, it was something about which I knew a little, and a subject in which I was interested. There was amusement and a clicking of tongues when I told them about milking by machinery, and noddings of understanding and approval when I told them that farming was now so mechanized that there were not enough animals to produce manure and the land had to be fertilized by chemicals, which exhausted the soil. I told them how due to industrialization we could not produce enough wheat or raise enough cattle for our needs. I told them about the Milk Marketing Board. I raked about in my memory and produced every scrap of information tucked away there, and the woman who had been in America diligently interpreted. At the end the head man courteously asked that their thanks be conveyed to me, and now they in turn wished to entertain their visitors with some dancing done by a village boy.

The boy had been lurking at the edge of the circle of light for some time, a small child whom I had taken to be about seven years old, but who was in fact ten. He wore a *longyi*, and his face was covered with *thanaka*. Two older boys provided music, with a flute and bamboo clappers.

With astonishing self-possession the young dancer hurled himself forward into the light and gave a very remarkable performance, in all respects similar to that of the young man who had danced in the street at Kawa, even to the grimacing and the rolling of the eyes. It was a quite astonishingly adult performance. I asked where he had learned it all and was told that he simply imitated. I had seen some very remarkable dancing in Rangoon by a troupe of pupils, both boys and girls, from the Mandalay School of Fine Arts, and I said

that I felt that this child seemed to have sufficient natural talent to warrant his being trained there. I was glad to learn that this was a probability. It was far too sophisticated a performance, and in some respects unpleasant—the leering and the eye-rolling—but considering that he had had no training whatsoever his inventiveness was amazing, and he had a flawless sense of rhythm.

After the dancing the party broke up, the villagers drifting away through the moonlight and shadows. I promised to take some photographs of Ma Hla Sein in the morning.

We had been accommodated in the schoolroom, we three women up one end, and the men at the other end. A mosquito net had been draped over a low platform, upon which we spread our bedding—though the bedding roll I had borrowed contained no mattress; it was only a cover in which to encase a blanket and pillow. Fortunately by that time I was quite used to sleeping 'hard'.

As soon as it was light there was a chanting of scriptures from the men's end of the room, and we females stirred from under our mosquito nets, took towels, crossed the bare boards of the floor to the staircase, where we thrust our feet into slippers, went down the stairs and across the rough grass to the bamboo enclosure and the water pots. In the night I had thought it was raining, from the continual pinging on the corrugated iron roof; in the morning I realized that it was the 'continual dew', which was still dripping with loud pings in drops as big as acorns.

We broke our fast with fruit and coffee at the long tables in the open-sided shelter where we had eaten and received the villagers the night before; then it was decided that we should walk across the fields to visit a man who had 'built a house from flowers'.

"Let us go," said U Ba Wan, rising.

I was a little worried.

"I arranged to photograph Ma Hla Sein this morning at eight," I said, "and it's now ten to."

"That is all right—she will be here."

"I expect so. But if we go now I shall not be here."

"She will wait."

"Shall we be long gone?"

"Two or three hours, only."

I went off with the party, wondering what would be considered a really long wait.

We walked up shady pedestrians-only lanes, and called in at a handweaving centre, where we sat on the floor and drank tea and looked at *longyi* lengths and the square fringed bags with long shoulder bands which are used by both sexes throughout the Union. A few purchases were made and we went on again, emerging from the cool dark alleys of the lanes into the shadeless glare of the fields, dry brown stubble where the paddy had been harvested, emerald-green in patches where there was ground-nut cultivation.

The man who had 'built his house from flowers' had a garden full of flowers—asters, cosmos, pink and blue larkspur—and a banana grove, and a bamboo house on stilts, set about with palms and pappas, and once again we left our slippers at the top of the steps and mats were unrolled for us in the big room off the verandah and we sat on the floor and drank green tea and ate bananas of a sweetness and lusciousness which made them seem quite unrelated to the lifeless stodgy bananas bought in shops far away in the West. Great gourds were suspended from the ceiling—as a protection against thunderstorms, I was told. When we left we were shown our host's cowsheds, scientifically constructed—under M.E. influence—with slightly sloping cement floors to drain the urine away. Then back across the shadeless fields, plucking ground-nuts here and there and cracking their soft white shells, and back to the school-house—where Ma Hla Sein waited, in her best *longyi*, a flower in her hair, and an enormous cheroot between her lips.

There was the usual mid-morning breakfast of rice and curries, and then in the heat of noon another trek by bullock-cart across the paddy fields to Khamagalay, a village where there was a loud-speakered sound-and-fury signifying that a *shinbyu* was in progress. The *shinbyu* is the feast of a boy's initiation to the monastic life—for a minimum of ten days, for years, or for life if he has the vocation. Although it somewhat suggests the equivalent of confirmation in the Christian Church it is in fact a baptism, when the novice—*shinlaung*—

takes the equivalent of a Christian name. In devout Buddhist families the boy remains at the *kyaung* for the whole of the long Buddhist Lent—for about four months, that is to say. It is a tremendously important occasion in the family when a boy is ready for his initiation. Usually it takes place in adolescence, but it can take place at any age provided he can recite the prescribed passages from the scriptures, and it is common in families for a number of boys to have their *shinbyu* at the same time, to save expense. In villages, where the people are very poor, several families will combine; even so it is a great expense, for many friends and relatives must be fed on these occasions. To give a *shinbyu* for orphans is a way of acquiring great merit.

The boy is dressed up in fine clothes and jewellery, symbolic of the luxury in which the prince Gautama lived before he renounced the world, received Enlightenment and became the Buddha; his face is powdered with *thanaka*, he wears a special glittering head-dress, decorated with tinsel flowers. He wears rings on his fingers, gold chains round his neck. He is altogether as splendid as his circumstances permit. If the family is poor and cannot raise much jewellery for the occasion relatives and neighbours lend it; at all costs the boy must be splendid—as he has never been before in his life, and never will be again, even on his wedding day. He is so splendid that he is not even allowed to set foot to ground—like a girl at her ear-boring festival, another important but nothing like so splendid an occasion. The boy is set upon a horse, or in a finely decorated car—in towns it is usually a car, or even a lorry—and taken on a round of calls to relatives and friends, and persons of importance in his village or town; ahead of him goes a band, and young men dancing and singing, on foot in villages, in towns—as I have seen it in Rangoon—in decorated lorries.

When all this is over he returns to his parents' house, where the head of the monastery to which he is to be admitted sits on a dais with other elders of the brotherhood. The monks hold their fans before their faces to shield their gaze from the women present—who are all wearing their gayest silk *longyis*, all their jewellery, and flowers in their hair. The scriptures are chanted, the boy makes his obeisances to the *pongyis*, removes his fine clothes and wraps himself in plain white

cotton, and submits his head for the cutting-off of his hair and the shaving of his head, which is done by a male relative. His mother and sisters treasure the hair—his mother may even wear it to add bulk to her own hair. After the head-shaving comes a bath, and then the boy puts on his finery again and presents himself to the chief *pongyi*, prostrating himself three times before him, in the accepted manner of obeisance before a holy man, and in the correct Pali formula asks to be accepted, his hands clasped in supplication. The head of the *pongyi-kyaung* then hands him the yellow robes and the begging bowl, and the other accessories of a *pongyi*, which the parents have laid out in readiness. When he is robed it is formally announced that he is a member of the *kyaung*, the chief *pongyi* gives a short address, and then all the *pongyis*, of whom the boy is now one, leave the house and walk in procession back to the monastery. Then the family and guests rise from their obeisances and proceed to make merry, with music and feasting; and sometimes there is *pwè*.

At the *shinbyu* I attended the boys were very young, not yet adolescent. The *shinbyu* was being given by their grandfather, who was having them all done at the same time—on the principle, as someone irreverently suggested, that it was 'cheaper by the dozen'. One of them appeared to be not more than six or seven years old, a tiny little mite with a whitened face and arrayed like a little fairytale prince. When we arrived they were all carried down the stairs from an upper room and sat upon a silk-draped sofa. They wore pink *pasoës* and elaborate beflowered head-dresses, and white socks. They all looked extremely solemn. A great crowd of people sat on mats on the floor, the loud-speaker blared Westernized Burmese music, fans were distributed, green tea and bananas and biscuits brought; photographs were taken. The front of the house appeared to have been removed for the occasion, at least in the main ground floor room. So many slippers had been left on the verandah that on leaving it was difficult to know one's own.

We stayed long enough to pay our respects to the occasion, admire the splendour of the candidates, and refresh ourselves with the plain tea. It was odd to think that these powdered and jewelled little princelings would return to that house in the early morning of the following day, with the other *pongyis* on

their rounds, no longer the fêted grandsons of the house but silent monks with shaven heads and downcast eyes, begging-bowl in hand. It must be strange to be a mother abasing herself to the ground before a little *pongyi* son—tremendous pride and love must enter into that gesture of profound respect and humility, the traditional *shikko*, made kneeling low on the ground and bowing three times with the forehead and the palms of the hands touching the ground. Such obeisance is made before the Buddha images in the pagoda shrines, and it is made by children to show respect to parents, uncles, and aunts; it is always made to holy men, and commonly made by women when giving food to *pongyis*.

After an inspection of some adult classes, followed by a meal in a bamboo house, and a short rest in which we drank plain tea, and those who wished to smoked cheroots or chewed *pan*, we climbed back into the bullock-cart, our next stop a visit to the community centre and a *pongyi-kyaung*. At the monastery we paid our respects to an old, old *pongyi* reputed to be over a hundred years old, a frail little old man all skin and bone who could barely raise himself on his mattress to regard the visitors who knelt before him and made their obeisances. Outside in the brilliant hot sunlight children raced about and young men and girls of the literacy classes assembled under the flowering trees of the compound for yet one more group photograph. The old man in the yellow robes lay on his mattress on the floor of the dark bamboo room of the *pongyi-kyaung*, panting with the slightest exertion, every movement an effort, even words seeming to come with difficulty from the sunken toothless mouth, and how could it be of any interest to him, I thought, who we were or where from or what we said, we who belonged to that land of the living from which he seemed already to have departed, so almost extinguished was the spark of life in him. Did he feel any communication, I wondered, with those who had still a long way to go along the long road he had already travelled? Surely it is horrible to be so old, outliving everything but that feeble spark of lingering life.

Coming out again into the external brilliance, I looked up at the window of the bamboo house and saw that the old monk had raised himself slightly and was peering out. . . . I do

not know why he seemed so lonely and pitiful, the poor old man, for in Burma the old are loved and venerated, and cared for without anyone thinking it in any way a burden. Nowhere in the East is there that callous impatience of the old characteristic of the West. But great age is lonely—it cannot be otherwise—no matter how much loving care surrounds it.

The final photograph taken, we set out in the bullock-cart once more, back across the paddy fields to Kawa. We arrived in the heat of mid-afternoon and spent some time sitting on the comparatively cool marble floor of the pagoda drinking iced drinks—made possible by the fact that the *pwe* was to open that night and crates of bottles and the ice from Rangoon had fortunately already arrived. A few other people similarly sheltered from the heat in the shade of the pagoda; they merely sat, as we did, waiting for the heat to pass, as though it were a shower of rain. The bullocks were taken into the shade of a banyan tree, and nothing moved in the glare but the inevitable gaunt pariah dog. It was not cool at the foot of the Buddha shrine, but at least it was out of the sun and glare, and there were stone slabs against which the back, aching from the bullock-cart jolting, could be rested.

When we went on again, the bullock-cart went ahead with our baggage and we went on foot. For a time we skirted a wide *maidan* where bullock-carts, their shafts upturned, stood in a semicircle in anticipation of the *pwe*. Far away in the distance, on a misty hill, stood a pagoda. U Ba Wan suggested that we might walk there, to the village of Phalay; it was about five miles away, he thought. I declared myself quite willing, since there and back would be only two and a half hours' walking, and even allowing for time to visit the pagoda we could be back before dark; but there were no other offers, and the idea was abandoned—or, rather, postponed until tomorrow. It seemed that if we left by bullock-cart at five-thirty in the morning we could be there and back in time to reach Rangoon by mid-day. That was the plan, but it did not work out like that.

In the meantime there was Kawa, so deep in dust that it seemed made of it, the trees white with it at either side the wide unmade main street, and the similarly wide unmade side streets each a miniature desert of dust. A continual traffic

of bullock-carts and bicycles and an occasional lorry kept a fog of dust perpetually drifting on the hot air. The dust was so deep that it was easier to walk in it barefoot; it was hot to the bare feet but bearably so.

We came eventually to a tall three-storey house lying back from the road across a dusty garden. It belonged to some Chinese people, but our host and hostess had only just returned from a journey and they were either too tired or too busy to see us. We had been allotted an enormous and completely empty room at the top of the house. We deposited our baggage and bedding-rolls, the men's at one end of the room, the women's at the other. Then we unpacked a little, hanging clothes and towels on the wire line stretched the length of the room. Our clothes were so wet with sweat that they clung to our bodies like wet bathing suits.

When we had cooled down we went out one by one on to a verandah at the back of the house and poured water over ourselves, the water running away through the slats of the flooring. Then we trekked out into the dust again to go to another house to eat. We sat on the floor, our backs to the wall, in a long row, our feet tucked up under us, as etiquette demands, and with our fingers ate rice and curries from mats of banyan leaves spread on the floor before each person. When we had eaten our fill the banyan mats were cleared away, plain tea was served in little bowls, and cheroots lit. The room opened its full length on to a verandah, so that as we sat it was possible to see out into the broad street, the white dust now all one with the tremendous moonlight. There was an unending procession of people, laughing, talking, singing, on their way to the *puè*, on foot and in bullock-carts, moving shadowily through the mists of dust swirling and wreathing in the silver light.

Presently there appeared on the verandah young men with brimmed hats and khaki shirts, cartridge belts and guns; the police, it seemed, had arrived. The Township Officer tucked a revolver into his belt and we were off to the *puè*. . . .

The *maidan*, so empty in the afternoon, was now crowded with people thronging the aisles between the food-stalls and sitting on mats in the huge space before the open-air theatre.

The police inspector made a way for us through the crowd and conducted us to a low dais, so that we should not have to sit on the ground. This attracted a good deal of attention from the crowd, diverting their interest from the island of light that was the stage. They gathered round, as they had done at the reservoir at Makyetkyi, and stared at length and with great curiosity.

Uniformed men moved about among the vast crowd examining with electric torches the mats on which people sat. They were, I was told, the fire-guard. What makes one bamboo mat more inflammable than another I never discovered.

It was endlessly fascinating sitting there under the tremendous full moon, alternately watching the distant square of brightness of the stage and the rapt moonlit faces of the people, faces that laughing or serious were always intent. Beyond the great mass of people the paddy fields were like a calm silver sea in the moonlight.

Somewhere around two o'clock, the moon still high in the sky, we left the seated crowd and joined the throng milling between the food-stalls, and came out to the edge of the *maidan* where there were open-fronted cafés, and long trestle tables with benches set out in the open. We sat at one of the tables and drank plain tea and ate some kind of fish—prawns perhaps—which we dipped into chilli sauce. Then, although we had to be up again at five, retraced our steps across the *maidan* and through the deep dust of the street to the big empty room at the top of the three-storey house.

The windows of the house were low and came down to the floor, with iron grilles across, so that lying on the floor it was possible to see out into the street. Nothing moved in the moonlit dust except an occasional slinking dog. Nothing moved until the bullock-cart came soon after five, when the moonlight was withdrawn and the sun not yet arrived and everything was held in a grey half-light that if not exactly cool was at least breathable.

In this grey light we climbed back into the bullock-cart and set out for the village whose hilltop pagoda five miles away was like a beacon.

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New *hti* for the pagoda, Kawa, Pegu district



Author at a bamboo house of poor people, near Rangoon

(Photo by David Maurice)



Author with the head man's niece, at Phalay, Pegu district

Although the village was reputedly only five miles away across the paddy fields it took us two hours to reach it by bullock-cart. Its pagoda, dark upon a hill top that seemed merged with the horizon, was sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left, as the track twisted and turned, but for a long time curiously never nearer. At that time of the year, just before the monsoon, when the paddy has been harvested and the cattle graze the hot dry stubble, the village is an oasis in the middle of burning golden desert, for the paddy fields encompass it on all sides. There are no roads to it or out of it. Only the tracks made by the bullock-carts across the paddy fields from the next village, which is a similar land-locked oasis.

The hooves of the bullocks and the wheels of the carts have worn deep ruts each side of the tracks, and the loose dust flies up like smoke. At various points across the wide plain long trailing coils of this dust weave tenuously through the heat haze like smoke from invisible trains as the carts lumber along the tracks. The yoked beasts plod on, their heads down to the dust raised by their feet, their gaunt flanks continuously under the flick and prod of the driver's whip. Sometimes they are flicked and prodded into a short ambling run; then the cart creaks and bumps and the passengers squatting on the straw laugh or groan in their discomfort. It is as though the journey across the shadeless plain has had no remembered beginning and can have no imaginable end.

Then, blessedly, there is the sudden brilliant green of patches of ground-nut cultivation, and now, only half a mile or so distant, tall thin hedges of bamboo. The pagoda hill is no longer visible; we have at last moved in under it. We have come to the village.

We enter it along a narrow lane between the tall bamboo, which in places arches it over. The greenness and the shade after the dry stubble and the glare create an illusion of coolness. There are flashes of scarlet flowers asserting themselves among the bamboo. Sometimes the bamboo gives place to palisades of tall straight cactus, sultry with dust. Bamboo houses stand away from the dust of the lane, withdrawn into the privacy of small compounds, shady with palms and banyans and koko trees. Small naked children run to the gates of the compounds to see who comes. Dogs run out barking.

The lane emerges in an open space where market women squat among their fruits and vegetables at the foot of a big old koko tree decked with fluffy pink flowers. A rough road climbs gradually to a steep flight of dark brick steps, overgrown with weeds and wild flowers to the base of the pagoda hill. We leave the bullock-cart and go on foot along this road. We have been met and refreshed by the village head man—who is young and very good-looking—and various elders. I do not remember seeing the child until I was aware of her standing beside a crumbling guardian lion on the pagoda hill.

She wore a clean faded floral *longyi*, and her little oval face was heavily covered with *thanaka*, so that it was as though she wore a white mask. She wore her hair in the traditional manner, with the circular fringe and topknot, and decorated with artificial flowers, both pink and white, the pink ones silver-tinselled, the white ones equipped with gold leaves. She wore diamond ear-rings and a finger ring of what looked like—and probably was—a Môgok ruby. I posed her for a picture against the crumbling *chinthe* at the top of the weedy steps and thereafter she was mine.

Thereafter she gathered flowers for me, and held her gay painted sunshade for me against the sun. We made a difficult journey with the sunshade for she could not hold it high enough, since she was scarcely as high as my heart, and it caught continually in my hair so that I must needs walk with my head bent. She conversed animatedly in Burmese, and I replied diligently in English. That we neither of us knew the other's language was of no consequence. We understood each other quite as well as many people who converse in the same tongue. We comprehended all the essentials—a mutual admiration, curiosity, sympathy, liking; and friendship grew with every step, ripening in a mango-shower of goodwill.

She conducted me by a series of green alleyways of short cuts back to the village, chattering all the time, holding the sunshade high—for all it was so impossibly low—taking long strides to keep up. In the bamboo house of the head man, her uncle, we were refreshed with coffee followed by green tea. When I went off to wash my dusty feet she came with me and insisted on doing it for me, small fingers deft with soap and dipper and towel. She watched with rapt curiosity when I

unwound the plait of my hair and rewound it round my head, and re-powdered my face. Back in the main room of the house she squatted happily beside me on the bamboo mat on the floor, quite unaware of the amused smiles her devotion was arousing in the women among whom—with characteristic Burmese sex-segregation—we sat.

She was all devoted attention. Did I wipe the sweat from my brow she immediately fanned me. Did I replace the bowl of tea as too hot for immediate drinking she immediately set to work to fan the tea to coolness. Before I had completed the last mouthful of biscuit she was handing me another. She fingered my wrist-watch and the hem of my cotton skirt, permitting herself the small intimacies that friendship sanctions. In turn I indicated by touching them my admiration of her ear-rings and her ring.

Immediately, then, she was suddenly earnest, no longer lightly prattling. Something important was being stated; something urgent; something demanding translation. The women all round were now laughing outright. One of them interpreted.

"She wants to give you her ear-rings and her ring, because you have admired them."

I was dismayed. "Tell her," I said, "that I cannot take them—that it would not be right for me to take such valuable things."

The woman, still laughing, translated to the child. And instantly the eager light went out of the small face and the dark eyes glowed with tears. Her reply was urgent, insistent.

There was more laughter and the woman who interpreted said, "She says she wants to give them to you because she loves you!"

Now it was in me that the desperate need to be understood worked, straining taut along an edge narrowly emotional.

"Tell her," I besought, "that it would not be right for me to take from her what has been given to her. But she may give me a flower from her hair, so that I may wear it in my own and remember her always."

"You express yourself very poetically!"

"Words are my trade." The human heart, too. But this

I could not say. The child's face was lifted to mine and the dark eyes beseeched.

"Tell her," I begged.

Amused, the woman interpreted and immediately the child's tensed body relaxed as her hands went up to the gold ring encircling her topknot. She removed the ring with the flowers attached and laid all in my lap. I separated the flowers, taking a spray of the white and a single blossom of the pink, and proceeded to secure them in my hair. Instantly she was kneeling up beside me, her small fingers weaving among the strands of my plait, and when all was arranged to her satisfaction she replaced the gold ring and the rest of the flowers in her own hair.

Everyone was very amused, but what was between the child and me was secret and inviolable, and a child knows these things, inhabiting its own private world, beyond reach of adult insensibility. Now the child was content and her hand never left mine, which it found secretly among the folds of my skirt as we sat together. Now her eyes were shining again, her face eager. My mind searched among the few possessions I had with me, for something to give her, and rejected them all. I, too, was possessed of gifts I was not free to dispose of.

And now the last cups of tea were swallowed and it was time to go. Outside in the hot bright sunlight the bullocks were being yoked again to the cart. We went down the steps together, the child with my camera and her sunshade in one hand, her free hand clutching mine. She stood with me by the cart, holding the sunshade over me, its prongs catching in my hair, to the end.

Then I bent and kissed her on both cheeks and there were exclamations of laughter, but the child did not laugh, and what she said she said gravely. But I do not know what it was, and I shall never know, only that in one form or another it was good-bye.

I followed the others up over the wheel into the cart and we moved off through the heat and the dust. Everyone smiled and waved and said 'Come again'. The child stood in the front of the crowd. She did not smile or wave or speak. Only stood there, very straight and small, watching the cart slowly disappear into the green tunnel of the bamboo.

(XVII)

THE DELTA: BASSEIN, WAKIMA
AND MAUBIN

BEFORE I left London Ram Gopal had said to me, "Try to visit my home town, Bassein, before you leave Burma. You will find my sister there, Jasswang Sahgal. Just ask for 'Daw Jessie'—they all know her."

I made a note of the name but said that I could not promise to include Bassein in the itinerary. Bassein is in the Delta, and it did not fit into any program that the Attorney-General had in mind for me, or any independent plan; and no historic or religious interest attached to it. There seemed no reason for going there.

But back in Rangoon Francis Story reported to me that in my absence a charming little old woman had come into the bookshop he runs in connection with the Burma Buddhist World Mission and introduced herself to him as Daw Jessie, sister of Ram Gopal. When he had told her that I was in Burma, and that I was a friend of her brother's, she became very excited, for it seemed she had read some of my early books years ago in India, and from my early autobiography formed a great admiration for me, without ever expecting that our paths would cross. But now that she had left her native India she found herself in the same country, the same city. She had insisted that when I returned to Rangoon I should be brought to the house where she was staying. Moreover, I had got back to Rangoon just in time to meet her, for she was returning to Bassein the following day. From the point of view of the working out of *karma* it was all very interesting.

We went to see her and I found a small sweet-faced elderly woman of great warmth and vitality; she talked animatedly about her famous dancer brother, about my books, about her conversion to Buddhism, and finally insisted that we should go to Bassein for the week-end—where we should stay was not

very clear in the swift flow of her enthusiasm, but we had only to let her know by what 'plane we should be arriving and we should be met. . . .

When we left her we had accepted the invitation and had agreed to fly on the Saturday, letting her know later by which 'plane.

"We might come back by river," Francis suggested.

It takes two days and a night to make the journey by boat, but only half an hour to fly.

Bassein, the second port of Burma, the place I went to 'by chance'—though the term is misleading—I liked better than any place in the Union. I was in more beautiful places and more interesting places, but no place spoke so much to my condition, with its busy waterfront and variety of shipping, its profusion of green flowering trees, its beautiful pagoda hung with tinkling golden bells, their music thin and sweet on warm air laden with the scent of tuber-roses and joss-sticks, its tri-shaw boys with bunches of white and pink jasmine on the handlebars of their machines. The streets of Bassein are as unmade and deep in dust as anywhere else in Burma, but they are not deep in refuse, not even along the waterfront. Bassein is a memory of crowding green trees, of crowded tall-masted ships, of fishing-boats, junks, and sampans, of a busyness of manifold human activities day and night; of piles of sweet-corn cobs, of heaps of earthenware water-pots grouped under a tree at a street-corner, of the evening wind whipping along the river, unexpectedly and blessedly cool—the blessedness of being able to breathe at last, and realizing that one had not known until then how great was the need to, and more than physically. To be with someone of one's own fashion, in one's own sort of place—'this the greatest blessing'.

We spent a long time the first evening leaning on the railing of the waterfront, watching the moored ships, and the scudding little boats with curved prows, and fishing boats with spreading sails, watching the movement of the wind-ruffled water, breathing the precious wind itself, hardly talking, content merely to be. We had lunched at a *pongyi-kyaung* and spent the heat of the day sitting there, on mats, in segregated groups, making desultory conversation. Then

Francis had called upon the family of an old friend, and I had been carried off by an Anglo-Burmese woman to meet some nuns at a convent—an Irish nun, and an English nun, and a French mother-superior. They had sweet faces and were full of warmth and friendliness and excitement, and the Irish, the Lancashire, and the French accents came strangely in that atmosphere of palm trees and heavily scented flowers. Then it was all over, the desultory conversations and the eager ones, and the heat of the day, and the going to and fro in cars; now only the wind along the river, the tilt of masts, the lap of water, and a communion that blessedly dispensed with the need for words.

The sun sank, drawing the swift twilight down after it, and we strolled along the waterfront where in small hooded boats men sat eating by the light of a single candle. There would be the play of the dim light on a brown body bare to the waist, and a sense of mystery where in fact was none. Dogs curled up in odd corners, in the deep dust of the gutters, and against the stacks of firewood unloaded from the ships. A boy sat in the shadowy interior of a café plucking a thin sweet music from some stringed instrument. There was that rare feeling—if only it were possible to make time stand still, with neither return to the known or going forward to the unknown.

The next morning there was a river party being given as a send-off to the D.C. who was leaving Bassein, and we were invited to join it. At the landing-stage I was reminded of the river trip from Mandalay to Mingun, so gay were the assembled *longyis*, so thickly had the *thanaka* been applied, so festive were the female heads of all ages with jasmine and roses and frangipani. So large was this party that two launches had been lashed together to provide accommodation for everyone. The women and children were disposed to congregate mainly in the cabins on the top decks, though some of them sat on the deck in the bows, below, shielding themselves with the handsomely painted sunshades for which Bassein is famous. The men were inclined to sit about on chairs outside the cabins, or lean against the rail; when they got tired of looking at the scenery they went into the cabins and sat on the floor and played cards. Servants were kept busy bringing trays with clinking glasses of whisky-and-ice. . . .

The scenery was unremarkable, but it was pleasant chugging along between the paddy fields, where small white storks, the 'paddy birds', decoratively perched on the ridges, and past narrow creeks fringed with the wide ragged leaves of wild bananas and plantains. Men fished from long narrow boats with brightly painted prows. Villages of bamboo houses huddled among plantains and palms. There were white and gold pagodas, their spires as slender as the palms that surrounded them. There were mangrove swamps with grotesque roots dripping with slime thrusting out over the mud of the foreshore. Wild blue water-hyacinths drifted in mid-stream on their clusters of broad flat leaves. The narrow creek which it had been intended to include in the trip was omitted and our course changed, as news had been received of insurgents shooting at a boat which had gone down there. Potting at boats in narrow creeks was as popular with insurgents, it seemed, as potting at cars from the scrub at the sides of roads. Nothing much happened, apparently, when boats were fired on; the passengers were warned to take cover, but as the boats were invariably taken by surprise it could be dangerous. A number of the river boats carried bullet marks on their sides.

At the small village of Wakima we tied up and some of the passengers, including Francis and myself, went ashore. But it was very hot and shadeless, and only the two bareheaded Europeans went any distance. "Mad dogs and Englishmen . . ."

The water was pale blue and smooth as silk, and seemed to fuse with the pale blue of the heat-misted sky. At the other side of the water the land was a strip of bright green. There were boats with lateen sails, like huge white butterflies. We went on for some distance, the hot sand burning our bare feet, but it seemed better to walk barefoot than have the sand forming a thin layer of grit inside one's slippers. We came to a deserted *pongyi-kyang*, and near it a large Buddha image under a shelter whose roof was now the merest trellis over-grown with wild vines. Tall cacti and bushes of dusty thorn grew all round, and behind was a tangle of jungle. Not far from this abandoned shrine another Buddha image crumbled in a brick shrine which was in process of being swallowed up by the thick aerial roots of the great banyan tree at whose base it had been erected.

Whilst we were examining these ruins a number of youths

from the village emerged from all directions and stood watching. They all wore faded cotton *longyi*s, and one of them, bare to the waist, completed his outfit with an old felt hat. We smiled at them and thereafter they escorted us wherever we went. That the white man should be wearing a *longyi* was no doubt puzzling enough, but when he made his obeisances before a Buddha shrine which was in use their astonishment must have been complete.

There were excitements in Bassein. A Japanese ship had moored in a berth which had not been used for a long time and was in trouble. I was never clear what it was, but it kept the river pilots out of bed all that night and until the early hours of the morning.

And then early the following morning insurgents shot up the pilot-cutter as it was returning to Bassein along the creek we had avoided as dangerous some fifteen hours earlier. I was beginning to feel that an encounter with insurgents would be welcome, instead of arriving, as I seemed to, the day or a few hours after they had left—or vice-versa.

A few hours after the shooting up of the pilot-ship Francis and I passed the creek again in the steamer for Rangoon. We looked hopefully along the narrow water-way.

He expressed my own thought.

"It would make a nice piece for your book if only they'd take a pot at us."

But that sort of thing was clearly not in my *karma*. The river was peaceful to the point of dullness. Peaceful *pongyi-kyaungs* nestling among trees, in accordance with monastic law—trees to give them shade, and seclusion from the world, and to provide them with fruits—jack-fruits, coco-nuts, bananas, the cooling tamarind. Peaceful villages where women drew water from the wells and men attended the fishing-traps, contraptions of bamboo and cord set at the water's edge. Peaceful pagodas glittering between their tall palms. And always the floating flowers, beautiful drifting weeds broken loose from the creeks where they sometimes formed so thick a carpet that the water was completely concealed.

Serene and beautiful it all was, but after a few hours monotonous. Also the heat, as the day wore on, became such

that the scenery would have had to have been very exciting indeed to make it worthwhile moving away from the vicinity of an electric fan. I suppose if anyone had told either of us that we could spend eight or nine hours in a small hot cabin with conversation as the sole amusement we should both have been sceptic; but thus it was, and by the evening there was still more to say—and the satisfactory feeling that there would always be more to say.

We tied up at Maubin for the night and the two Europeans went ashore.

It was near sundown and the red dust was rising from the unmade streets in a red-gold haze. Maubin is notorious for its mosquitoes and all the windows are covered with perforated wire shutters, but it is a pleasant enough little town, with avenues of tall palms along its waterfront, wide avenues with houses set back in compounds thick with trees, the usual crowded bazaar streets, and food-stalls lining the walk up from the quay. There are some Western-style shops with glass windows. In the forefront of the window of a tailor's there was the dummy of an incredibly foolish-looking young man with a staring, determined do-or-die expression. With *longyi* and *cingyi* he wore knotted round his throat a heavy black and white check woollen scarf, such as a ski-er might wear, and the whole surmounted by an aggressively smart felt hat set at a rakish angle.

When we had recovered our equanimity after this startling encounter we continued on our way to the pagoda, where we sat on a stone bench at the side of the covered way up to the shrine. It was pleasant sitting there watching the people pass, usually in twos and threes, talking and laughing, the young men with their narrow hips and straight backs, the girls with flowers in their hair and themselves like flowers in their bright *longyis*. At the end of the covered way there were small lights, secret and beautiful, in the dimness that shadowed forth the great Buddha image. The people moved silently on their bare feet, and their voices were no more than a light brush of wings in the stillness, soft as the cooity-coo of pigeons somewhere out of sight.

We sat a long time in the peacefulness, till the sun went down and the moon came up. Then through the arches at each side of the path tall palms emerged suddenly black against the

sky, and the broad strips of green silk of the bananas and plantains dripped with moonlight; dripped and glistened with it, as though it were silver water. There were jasmine bushes somewhere near, filling the air with a heavy sweetness. All round people lay sleeping on bamboo mats on the warm tiles. Pariah dogs curled up on the trestles used in the daytime by the pagoda flower-sellers. And always the shadowy, candlelit life going on in a kind of pagoda hinterland, in cave-like recesses behind the shut up stalls, blending the smell of frying with the scent of tuber-roses and the jasmine.

The lights round the shrine went out, and all was darkness, with deep shadows laid aslant the tremendous moonlight, and there were no people any more. It ought to have conveyed something to us that the lights were extinguished and that the procession of people had finished, that the silence and the moonlight were now one. But it was only when the dogs on the nearest trestle began to pick a quarrel, snapping and snarling at each other, that we felt we had sat there long enough and got up and walked away, coming out into a world emptied of everything but the moonlight and the shadows.

We walked back through the deep dust to the landing-stage. On the steamer and its flat there was a dull glow of light, and with the sight of it came a memory of the heat on board. It would be impossible to sleep in that heat; and it was anyhow too early for two people so nocturnal. By mutual consent we turned and walked along by the water, heading for an avenue of palms, in the opposite direction to the one we had taken earlier. There were a great many dogs wandering about, muzzles to the ground, but no other sign of life. People in these parts, we thought, went very early to bed. . . .

Then we realized that they had not gone to bed. There were lights visible through the cracks of the small bamboo houses at either side of the unmade road. The houses were some distance apart. From the first, as we passed, came the sound of bamboo clappers, such as are used in orchestras. This had no significance until a few yards farther on, passing another shut-up house, the sound was repeated. Then it seemed odd—like a signal. We came to cross-roads, white and mysterious in the moonlight, wide dusty roads with dark crowding palms and the occasional hut of a house, stretching in four directions.

From a house on one corner a man's voice shouted, unmistakably challengingly. We stopped, then, startled, uncertain. Francis answered in English, "We are from the ship."

No one emerged from the house from which the voice called, but the clappers continued to follow us from house to house as we went on, and presently another voice challenged—more sharply this time. It was eerie walking in the white moonlight in a world which seemed inhabited only by prowling dogs and watching, hidden, suspicious people. Once a dog, taken by surprise, scurried from under a thorn bush beside us, snarling and yelping, and suddenly the stillness was splintered by barking and howling from all directions, far and near. It was horrible, as though a pack of jackals had been started up. I found it unnerving and suggested that we should go back, but my companion declared that there was no need to behave like Hansel and Gretel in the haunted wood just because a few dogs barked.

So we went on, and presently we were beyond the houses and the following signals, and there was only a moonlit emptiness of paddy fields, beyond the fringing palms, at one side of the road, and the molten silver of the river by which we walked. We came to a sacred tree enclosed behind palings, with a lamp like a street-lamp suspended above. A little farther on there was another sacred tree, girdled round by a wooden ledge on which offerings could be placed. It was a *Nat* shrine, the spirit reputedly dwelling in the tree. Near it was a landing-stage, with a roofed shelter. A number of boats were moored along the bank here, each with a candle burning under the hood. In the uncovered prows men slept, without protection from mosquitoes.

We sat on the planks of the landing-stage, dangling our feet above the water. The mosquitoes were apparently busy elsewhere. We discussed rebirth and the continuity of life and the relentless logic of *karma*. Our voices disturbed the sleeper in the nearest boat and he roused, uneasily, raising himself on an elbow and peering through the moonlight; but when he had reassured himself of our harmlessness he settled to sleep again. To many of the fishermen of the rivers these covered boats are their home.

When we finally walked back the clappers followed us from house to house and the dogs darted from point to point in

the empty moonlight, but those who watched us unseen no longer challenged.

The steamer, when we reboarded it, was quite as hot as we had remembered it. How the deck passengers slept on the bare boards immediately above the furnace of the engine-room seemed miraculous—men, women and children curled up among their bundles and pots. There were a number of soldiers, and *pongyis*, the robes of the latter brilliant in the moonlight. The broad shining highway of the river melted into the sky at some point in infinity. Narrow creeks meandered into eternity through high jungles of bamboo. Weird shapes of roots and branches, dripping with slime, lifted almost sinisterly from the mangrove swamps. The white spires of pagodas floated with the quality of mirage in the translucency. The moonlight seemed liquid on the broad fronds of the plantains at the river's edge. There was stillness without silence. A voice talking on the flat went on endlessly; there was the chugging of an engine. A shadowy figure fished with a rod and line from the side of the flat, symbol of human patience and hope. Creeks and river and paddy fields were light as day, but it was a light suffused with the unreality of dream. When the moon went down it was as though night had come. And then suddenly it was dawn with a rattling of chains, a commotion of shouting, a ringing of bells.

Sometime during the day we learned that Maubin had recently had insurgent trouble and there was a nine o'clock curfew.

There was a great display of forked lightning as we approached Rangoon in the evening, though there was neither rain nor thunder. Rangoon from the river looked big and straggling, spangled with lights, with here and there the blaze of neon lights. But remote from all the garishness, and high above the crowds and shrill clamour, the Shwe Dagon Paya glimmered like a huge golden bell against the ominous sky. Beautiful the moonlight at Maubin, and the white sails at Wakima in the blaze of noon, beautiful so many things in this land which wears the Irrawaddy on its bosom like a golden necklace; but the Shwe Dagon remains incomparable, and to see it again at a journey's end is to experience a lift of the heart and a sense of homecoming.

(XVIII)

*THE SOUTHERN SHANS: TAUNGGYI
AND KALAW*

STEPPING out of the 'plane at Heho airfield into the comparative coolness of the Southern Shans was as much of a 'shock' as stepping out of the 'plane on to Mingaladon airfield had been when I first arrived in Rangoon. Then I had forgotten what real heat was like. At Heho, coming so soon after the time in the Dry Zone, and the shadeless aridity of the paddy fields of the Pegu district, I had forgotten what it was to be cool—for the Northern Shans had by then receded into something experienced in other worlds long ago.

It was cool. That is to say it was pleasantly warm. It was the sort of weather which on the rare occasions when it occurs in England causes people to puff and blow and complain of 'the heat'—with the temperature somewhere in the lower seventies. When I left Rangoon at eight o'clock that morning a servant girl had come rushing after me just as I was climbing into the car that was to take me to the airfield—she had brought my coat, which had been hanging in the cupboard since the day of my arrival. "Taunggyi!" she exclaimed, and gave a demonstration of shivering. I declined to take the coat with me, remembering Maymyo, which is also regarded by the Burmese as 'cold'. And stepping out into the soft warmth of Heho I was very glad I had left the coat behind.

Heho is some twenty-four miles from Taunggyi, the little town which is the official capital of the Shan States, perched on a plateau some four thousand feet up in the hills. The road which repeatedly doubles back on itself on the long climb up from the plain of Heho reveals a landscape of quite incredible beauty. From the first 'shelf' above the Heho plain another plain comes into view—a much greater plain, seeming to stretch away in a haze of heat to an infinitely remote horizon.

It is not bare and checkered with paddy fields like the Heho plain, but wooded, with a lake in the near distance called the White Crow Lake, and the plain itself is the Plain of the White Crow. Some forty years ago a white crow was found there, and a white crow is sacred, like a white elephant or a white peacock, because a bird or beast so rare and remarkable is believed to house a being who will eventually achieve Buddhahood. The White Crow Lake is said to resemble the shape of a bird flying, but I cannot honestly say that it looked like that to me, though I am prepared to believe that it does when viewed from a higher altitude. I saw only a small irregularly shaped sheet of water glimmering on a plain which was like a vast and very beautiful park.

There was the pleasant shock of recognition of seeing again the dusty grass at the sides of the road shadowy with the small mauve wild flowers which I saw first at Maymyo and which are everywhere in the cool hills. And there were the hooded bullock-carts again, and the tall pointed Shan hats and loose baggy trousers, but now instead of the gipsyish Kachins there were the Tai-Chinese *Taungthus*, whose women wear what must surely be the most hideous costume of human beings anywhere, consisting of black turbans and shapeless black tunics and leggings of rough material like serge. Silver rings round their legs denote whether they are married or single. A young woman seated on a grassy bank under some trees at the side of the road nursing a child was unexpectedly beautiful, with the ugly black clothing stripped away, her flesh a cool-looking deep cream.

The setting of Taunggyi is beautiful in the extreme, the town itself nothing very much—Chinese and Indian shops at each side of a busy main road, some Chinese hotels, a market place, unmade pavements; a nondescript sort of place, but at least the streets are free of refuse, and if pariah dogs exist they are unobtrusive. The town is flanked at one side by a high wooded hill, its highest point known as 'the Crag', where there is a Buddhist shrine. On the lower slopes of this hill, with wonderful views out over the plain, there are many charming houses set in gardens full of flowers and blossoming trees, the homes of government ministers and state officials.

There is also a reservoir up there in the woods, a place

whose deep green jungly beauty of lush vegetation, bamboo, and brooding dark water is contradicted by a rustic bridge and neat unadventurous paths. Up there on those wooded slopes, too, where an avenue of big old banyans goes off from the road, climbing a little, there is a small pagoda and a *pongyi-kyauung*. There are no less than twelve *pongyi-kyauungs* to this small town.

At the other side of the town there are bare grassy hills, on one a *pongyi-kyauung*, on another a huge upright golden Buddha image in a wooden shelter with a platform in front of it. From up here the plateau reveals itself as a valley full of huddled houses, flowering trees, and sunshine. From below, when the sun sets behind the multiple roofs of the monastery with their upturned gables, and the great roof above the shrine, all seems black lacquered on a crimson screen, stylized, and Japanese.

But the greatest beauty of Taunggyi is its flowering trees, which are everywhere—the mauve blossomed jacaranda trees, the cassia trees with their papery scentless blossoms of bright pink that fade to white near the end of their flowering, the feathery strawberry pink blossoms of the tall koko trees, the pendulous, heavy-scented white lilies of the belladonna trees, the scarlet lilies of the flame-of-the-forest trees, the burnished gold of the *gul-mohur*, the yellow of the *pyauktauk* trees that bloom three times before the mangoes ripen and the rains come and the New Year dawns . . . all these and many more, with poinsettias and frangipani and purple convolvulus and wine-coloured bougainvillea, and a fleshy orange coloured honey-suckle thrown in as it were for make-weight.

The travel story of every traveller in difficult places—and from the point of view of travel Burma is a difficult place—must be to some extent a story of the struggle to get the permits and the transport to achieve the desired objectives. That in Burma I was the guest of a government organization, and the personal guest of the Attorney General, made possible for me a great deal that would not otherwise have been possible—or which would have been possible only as the result of a good deal of running round after permits. I was fortunate in that the matter of permits and police registrations, and armed escorts for insurgent areas, was all, as the Americans say, 'taken care of' for me through the Attorney General's office, and transport by



In the Delta : Bassin



Chinthes, near Kalaw, Shan States

road or air to each place was arranged by the Buddha Sasana Council. But once in a place a certain amount of initiative was necessary to get out of it again, as witness my departure from Kyaume, and my difficulties regarding transport at Nyaungu.

Also, between getting transport to a place and out of it again there is the problem of getting transport whilst there to see what is to be seen. And in the East, where European nerves fray easily, and where the Western notion of efficiency has made little headway, all the problems present themselves as a little larger than life-size. There is a sense in which Kipling was right that as between East and West 'never the twain shall meet'—because their mental and emotional orientations are fundamentally different.

In Taunggyi my difficulties began immediately on arrival, for I found that it had been arranged for me to stay at the school-house, a bungalow in the large school compound.

"You will like it," declared the Anglo-Burmese wife of a schoolmaster, who met me at Heho. "You have a cassia tree right outside your door. And an Indian servant to look after you. He will cook English meals for you."

"Am I to stay there alone?"

"Yes. You will have it all to yourself."

"I think I shall be very lonely." What, I wondered, bleakly, was I expected to do, all alone in the school-house, after I had eaten my solitary meal? It would be the Circuit House at Bhamo all over again. I had a feeling I was not going to stay at this school-house.

As soon as we entered the big compound I knew quite certainly I would not. The cassia tree in full bloom at the road side of the compound was a wonderful sight against a background of hills, blue sky, and massive white clouds. But the bungalow was some distance from the rest of the school buildings—a solitary inmate would be a great deal lonelier than in the Bhamo Circuit House, where at least the butler and his family lived at the rear. I am quite used to being alone and capable of being alone without being lonely. But being alone in familiar surroundings, surrounded by one's own Lares and Penates and with plenty to occupy one, is a very different matter from being alone in a strange place in a strange land. I was not physically afraid to be alone there, but I was afraid

of the loneliness. And in some indefinable way the place itself repelled me—almost as though it housed some *Nat* hostile to my presence. It was not an emanation of evil, but of rejection. The rooms were dark and desolate. There was a small sitting-room off the verandah, and opening out of it a school-room with piled-up desks and forms. At the back was a small uninviting bedroom, and adjoining it the empty desolate kitchen quarters and the usual cement-floored bathroom.

Even the broad bright sunny daylight could not make the place seem other than dark and desolate and intolerably lonely. No doubt when its owner was there, with his pupils and colleagues about, books set out, and the place alive and warm from being lived in, it assumed a quite different air. But this was a place from which the owner had been gone some time, on leave; it was a shut-up place—a place that was not expecting anyone. It was certainly not expecting me.

I did not unpack my suitcase.

"I cannot stay here," I said, firmly. I added, "Would *you* stay here—alone?"

"Oh no! Nothing would make me!" Her voice rang with dismay.

"I wonder who lacked the imagination to think that I would!"

"I think the Resident arranged it for you."

"I understood the Home Minister was making the arrangements for my stay here."

"He is away at present."

"You said the jeep was coming back at three o'clock to take me anywhere I wanted to go. I would be glad if you would tell the driver to take me to the Resident. He may have some suggestions. If he hasn't I have an introduction to a Mr. Richard Aldworth here——"

"Mr. Aldworth—oh yes. Perhaps you can stay at his house."

"Perhaps. We will first see what the Resident has to say. But now, before the jeep comes back, what do I do about a meal? I am famished!"

It was by then about two o'clock, and I had eaten nothing since six-thirty in Rangoon.

"The servant is out. He has gone to the bazaar to buy things for you. He will be back soon. Now I must leave you."

When I was alone I rummaged in my Shan bag and fished out a banana—that great standby of the East. I sat in front of the empty grate eating it and wondering whether the Southern Shans were going to prove as difficult for me as the Northern Shans had been. I flung the banana peel into the hearth and went out and walked round the compound and took some pictures of the beautiful tree, then went back into the house and sat down feeling tired and dispirited and in great need of a cup of tea. Hearing a step I went out on to the verandah where a young girl in European clothes stood bearing a tray—and on the tray unmistakably a teapot.

“Mummy sent you this over.”

‘This’ was a pot of tea, bread and butter, fried eggs. I sat at the table and ate my first and last meal in the house. Whilst I was eating it the Chief Education Officer arrived to invite me to dine at his house that evening. He would send a car for me, he said. I told him, “Don’t send it here. I’m not staying here. I don’t know where I shall be. You had better get in touch with the Resident.”

Fortified by the tea I no longer felt dispirited, but purposeful.

The big and noble house which is now the State Guest House was once the Residency. The new Residency is a house much too small for its purpose, the more so as U Thaung Pe, the present Resident, has a family of young children. He took my defection from the school-house amiably enough. But what to do with me?

“You could stay here,” he said, “but you would not be very comfortable. There are, as you see, children.”

Yes, I saw that there were children. I also heard them. There was a great sound of children in the house, and they bobbed in and out of doorways and smaller ones appeared carried in arms. I told him that that was all right, that I liked children, and that I didn’t mind how uncomfortable I was. I was quite happy to share a room with children.

It was more or less settled that I should stay there. Then there remained the problem of what to do with me. What, he asked, was my program? I replied that I hadn’t a program, as I didn’t know what there was of interest in or near Taunggyi. In a few days, however, I wanted to get to Kalaw.

"The problem is transport," he murmured. "The day after tomorrow the Prime Minister arrives and then all available transport will be required."

I could not, I gathered, have arrived at a more difficult time. I pointed out that the arrival of U Nu the day after tomorrow did not affect today or tomorrow. There must be something I could do tomorrow, whilst transport was still available.

"The difficulty is to find someone to accompany you—everyone is busy, preparing for the visit."

But having won the battles of Kyaume and Nyaungu I was not prepared for retreat at Taunggyi.

"Do I need to be accompanied to Kalaw?" I inquired.

"At Kalaw you must spend the night. Let us draw up a program."

Had all the difficulties of escort and transport suddenly melted away? But mine not to reason why. Whom did I wish to meet in Taunggyi? I wished to meet Daw Mimi Khaing, and Mr. Richard Aldworth. Also, on his return, the Home Minister. Daw Mimi Khaing I would meet tonight at dinner at the Education Officer's house. Mr. Richard Aldworth we could call on this afternoon. Tomorrow I could make the trip up the Inle Lake and see the leg-rowers. The day after I could go to Kalaw. When I got back the Home Minister would have returned. The Resident made notes and did a little telephoning, and children peeped round the open door shyly, and outside in the bright clear sunlight there was the long-drawn single-note whistle of a bird endlessly repeated, and a little distance off the summery monotony of a cuckoo. I was introduced to the Resident's wife and sister, and then with his sister we set off to find Mr. Aldworth, of whom Leigh Elsum had spoken warmly to me down in Mergui.

He proved to be an Anglo-Burman with a Burmese wife. I gave him the letter from Leigh Elsum and he was immediately cordial. Whilst the Resident and his sister were talking to Mrs. Aldworth her husband asked me where I was staying. I told him, "At the Residency, I think, though the Resident assures me it will be very uncomfortable." I told him of my revolt in connection with the school-house. He said, simply, "You can stay here if you like." I thought that I would like, for I liked Richard Aldworth and his wife, and I liked his pleasant chalet-

like house set far back from the road at the end of a long narrow garden full of English summer flowers. But would it not offend the Resident, I asked, since it was more or less settled that I should stay there? Richard Aldworth said, "I think he would prefer that you should stay here—he hasn't much room in his house."

So it was arranged, and I was given a tiny room to myself, and the pretty beauty-prize winner daughter, Vanda, came in—and I discovered that if encouraged Mrs. Aldworth would speak English, and I felt very much at home. There was even a charming little cat to remind me of my own. Perhaps after all the Southern Shans were going to prove less difficult than the Northern states. . . .

In the morning, before the mists had dissolved from the deep valleys, an official and his wife, sent by the Resident, came round in their car, with the usual servant tucked away in the back with the hampers of food, and we zigzagged down to the plain and ran for some time through paddy fields, where women in high pointed Shan hats moved forward in long lines pulling up the young paddy for transplanting from the nursery beds to the flooded fields. There were a great many pink buffaloes—huge naked-looking beasts used for ploughing, though the Government urges the use of oxen for the purpose, as more proficient. But the people do not take easily to new ideas, and the buffalo, which likes water, is the traditional beast for the task.

The little lakeside town of Nyaungshwe with its wooden balconied houses and high hills behind is like a Swiss mountain town, though ramshackle and untidy as a Swiss town could never be. Its unmade streets are clean enough, free of refuse, but plenty of gaunt pariah dogs prowling about, and bitches with skinny puppies gambolling round them. Here we took a long flat-bottomed boat spread with bamboo mats, so that slippers were removed on entering it, as on entering a house. The boat carried an outboard motor, but for some time, as we moved through weed-locked creeks to the open lake, it was necessary to paddle. This weed is the water-hyacinth which drifts on the rivers. It covers the creeks so thickly in places that the water is completely hidden over; a boat must cleave a way through it.

For some time after leaving the creek we chugged down a narrow waterway with green cultivated lands at either side, sometimes fields green with the grass-like blades of the young paddy, sometimes with the young corn. Occasionally there were patches of flower and vegetable cultivation—the flowers mostly asters—raised a few inches above the water. The paths between them are waterways, big enough to take a narrow boat. In the rains they become flooded and have to be pumped out with a water-wheel. There are bamboo houses which stand on stilts in the water; in the rains the water rises high up the stilts, but not to the floors. The people live mainly by fishing, though some cultivate their watery market-gardens, and work in the fields.

We soon met with the leg-rowers, and a fine sight it is when four of them stand one behind the other, each with a right leg hooked round the oar, 'walking' it through the water. The oar is manipulated like a punt pole, but the leg hooked round it gives it a greater impetus than is possible by hand. Sometimes going through the creeks our own boatman would use an oar in this way. The bamboo is thick at each side of the creeks, and beyond the bamboo the paddy and wheat fields. Again and again it was necessary to stop the engine of the boat and cleave a way through the green carpet of water-hyacinth. There were flocks of teal winging over in formation, and when we passed the water-villages buffalo immersed with only their heads above water were in danger of being run over by the boats.

After a long time in the creeks we came out to the broad open lake flanked at one side by high hills. At the far side the golden spires of pagodas emerged from among groups of tall palms. Here we were among the thousands of floating islands of the lake, each staked with a bamboo pole through the middle to prevent it drifting. In places the islands have been marshalled into rows to mark off the fishing-grounds. Bamboo houses on stilts stand on small green islands very little bigger than the space occupied by the house itself. An eagle perched like a parrot on a bamboo stake pinning down an island.

We went out to a 'rest-house' in the middle of the lake. Here whilst the servant and the boatman prepared the food we had brought with us we leaned on the balustrade as on the rail of a ship and watched the multitudes of fishes moving like shadows through the clear deep emerald water, and the fishing-

boats with their cone-shaped basket-nets which occupy about two-thirds of the length of the boat itself.

We had just finished our meal and were leaning on the balustrade again idly watching the water when another boat came up the lake and tied up at the steps of the rest-house. It contained two large Americans, a young Anglo-Burman girl and a younger girl. One of the Americans was very big and pink, with a hirsute body stripped to the waist. Both came ashore with glasses of whisky in their hands. They had come up from Kalaw that morning, it seemed, where they were staying in the hotel. They had heard about me—the big one had addressed me by name—at Nyaungshwé—where they had had some difficulty in getting a boat because of me, though how this could be since I was ahead of them was not very clear. They invited me to have a drink. I replied that it was not yet sundown, but with loud laughter they declared that it was time it was. The bigger of the two had bright blue eyes and reddish hair and an Irish name. His friend was smaller and less vociferous, with a slightly 'superior' air. He carried an expensive-looking camera. I asked him if he had taken any good pictures, and he said that so far he had only taken two, because he hadn't seen anything worth photographing. I suggested that there were some very beautiful pagodas, to which he replied that pagodas were "a dozen a dime". . . .

We went on, hurtling through the water at what seemed like speed-boat speed. We put in at a village, but we could not take the boat up the creek as a market was on and the creek was already full of boats; we had therefore to walk up the creek from boat to boat. Some of the boats were so old and flimsy that they tilted precariously as we stepped into them; others were half-decked with iron plates which the sun had made burning to the feet. My hostess bought an earthenware pot for half a *kyat*, and a huge jack-fruit, which is like a Rugby football in shape and like a hedgehog to hold. There was a clothing market, but things were cheaper in Taunggyi, I was told. We scrambled back through the boats—the boatman carrying the earthenware pot and the jack-fruit—and continued on up the lake. We came in half an hour or so to the weaving village of Inpawkon, where some of the

houses stand on piles in the water, others on small pieces of ground just big enough to accommodate them. The rattle of looms is audible from some distance away, for there is a loom in every house. We went ashore and into one of the houses and sat on the floor and drank plain tea and examined some of the *longyi* lengths woven in beautiful designs from Chinese silk. Most of the silk woven in Burma is imported from China because the Buddhist rule about not taking life applies in the matter of the chrysalides of silkworms, which must be suffocated in their cocoons in order to prevent the destruction of the threads of the silk. Silk is grown in Burma—in Prome, and south of Mandalay—but silk-growers are a despised section of the community, like fishermen and slaughtermen. Like the fishermen they live apart, mostly on the hillsides, where the mulberry bushes essential for the silkworms thrive better than on the plains. But the home-grown silk is coarser than that imported from China. Sir George Scott (Shwe Yoe) speaks of the Shans using vegetable dyes 'obtained from various jungle seeds, roots, flowers, leaves, and bark', but the present-day Shans appear not to have heard of vegetable dyes. In this house at Inpawkon I was shown the tins of chemical dyes, and when I told them about the vegetable dyes used for dyeing the tweeds woven in the small towns and villages of the West of Ireland they were interested but manifestly puzzled. There were several looms in this house, and some of the designs being woven were very intricate and fine, demanding a great many shuttles. The work is slow and highly skilled, therefore the finished product is expensive. I bought a four-yard length for seventy-five *kyats*—that is to say a little under £6. The price originally asked was eighty *kyats*, which my companions declared was too much. It seemed to afford them satisfaction to bargain, and this five *kyats* reduction—rather less than ten shillings—was regarded as a triumph.

The house stood on piles on very little more ground than would support it. Chickens ran about below. The surrounding houses were very close, with narrow lanes of water between. From every house came the rattle of looms. Some of the houses stood with their feet in the water; others on their tiny islands; some were several storeys high, like old English mill-houses, others, like this one, one-storeyed and balconied. On some of

the patches of ground were plantains and sweetcorn; there was even a palm or two. There was an odd sense of peacefulness in the busy clatter of the looms. "The water people work harder than the land people," said my companions. They themselves had lived there during the Japanese occupation, having fled from Taunggyi; the Japanese did not trouble the water-villages—they had no use for them.

Returning in the later afternoon sunshine we passed an evening market in the shape of boats laden with flour, fruit and vegetables, sweets, spices, clothing, calling at the houses. Housewives did their shopping squatting on the lower steps of their houses, the boats swaying gently below them. But others were going shopping by boat to the open shops and stalls perched on stilts in the water. There was a great and colourful busyness on the lake wherever there was a village. The bright colours of the *longyis* was reflected in the water and the open-fronted shops gave back colours as brilliant and as varied.

We called at a *pongyi-kyau* on its island of sunbaked mud. In the pagoda there was a dark shrine with a golden Buddha image surrounded by flowers and guttering candles. My hostess lit joss-sticks and candles which she had brought with her, leaving some as a present for the *pongyis*.

Now as we returned to the creeks across the glimmering water the palms darkened against the sunset. Here and there a white pagoda with a golden *hti* caught the sunset glow and seemed to become part of all that soft radiance. Then we turned into the green lanes of the creeks, where tall poles thrust up to mark out the waterway through the wilderness of bamboo and weeds. Sometimes boats passed us, going upstream, and then our boatman would stop the engine so that these laden boats, propelled by leg-rowers, or paddled, would not be subjected to a strong backwash. So laboriously the people moved their boats through the weeds that our powerful engine seemed an affront, an injustice. But when a boat propelled by leg-rowers bounded forward in long strong leaps our fussy mechanical noisiness seemed merely vulgar.

Back at Nyaungshwe the bamboo mats from the boat, our tiffin-carriers, our baskets of crockery, the earthenware pot and the jack-fruit bought in the lake village market, the sun-umbrellas, were transported back to the car, and we sat for

a while in an open-fronted room attached to a garage and drank plain tea, and the silk I had bought at Inpawkon was examined and admired and the cost inquired.

Before leaving Nyaungshwe we visited the palace of the Sawbwa. We walked through huge dismantled state rooms, where all that was of interest was a six-foot stone candle and a huge drum, both tied to a post in the throne-room. Actually the Sawbwa's elder son acts for him, as the Sawbwa himself, who was previously President, is now the Speaker in Parliament.

The Sawbwas, as such, are on the way out, already divested of their ruling power, yet, it seems, retaining a certain lingering moral influence over their people. Most of them have residences in Taunggyi, but, also, most of them maintain their palaces, and, I was told, "the people always like it when the Sawbwa comes back to them." Nevertheless, when independence came they were voted out of power. But as they are given the first offer of posts in the new Administration their temporal power has merely been transferred to another sphere.

The day after 'operation Inle Lake' was the day of the Prime Minister's arrival, and I knew that it would be useless to attempt to organize transport to Kalaw or anywhere else. Bunches of white roses were brought to the Aldworth house in the morning—to be made into a bouquet for presentation to the Prime Minister's wife, I learned. I pointed out that they were far too full-blown for the purpose. If the bouquet was to be of white roses there were some excellent half-opened roses in the garden, I ventured to suggest. Vanda thereupon went down the garden with a pair of scissors, followed by the gardener carrying the basket, to gather these more suitable blooms. When they were brought into the house they were handed to me, with about two yards of white silk ribbon and a hank of bamboo straw.

"If there are not enough flowers we can get more," said Mrs. Aldworth.

"You mean you want me to make the bouquet?"

"We cannot do it. We do not know how."

Mother and daughter smiled sweetly, confidently, then went off to attend to the matter of Vanda's court dress, the dressing of her hair, the stringing of the jasmine she would wear in it.

Mr. Aldworth, passing through the kitchen, where I stood beside the table doubtfully regarding the pile of roses, the bamboo, and the length of ribbon, remarked cheerfully, "You've got your work cut out!" Then he too went about his business.

I had never made a bouquet for presentation before, though I had made up a good many bouquets of flowers from my English garden to give to friends. In a formal bouquet, I thought, the flowers would need wiring into position here and there, and the coarse strips of bamboo which had to serve for wire were clumsy for the purpose. And since I was to make the bouquet I would have preferred to have selected the flowers for it myself. I needed, I decided, a great many more than had been supplied to me. I took a kitchen knife and went out into the garden and cut some more roses, pink as well as white, and some long stems of blue delphinium. It all took some time to arrange satisfactorily, lacking any wire, but it all looked well enough when finally done, decked out effectively with a fine white mist of gypsophila. It was just a pity that at the very end I pricked my finger, shedding blood on the white ribbon, but with a little dexterous retying it did not show, and what the Prime Minister's lady might discover later should she untie the ribbon was not my affair; all I was concerned with was the production of a professional-looking bouquet for presentation. . . .

I did not know until the last minute that I was expected to attend the reception. I then hurtled into my long skirt, and having no long-sleeved blouse as required by the formality of the occasion, draped the velvet stole over my bare arms, tucked carnations into my hair, and ran down the steps to join Mrs. Aldworth and Vanda in the car.

It was pouring with rain. It had rained all the morning, and now in the afternoon it was raining harder than ever—a deluge of rain. We drove to the Residency, where another young girl, also a beauty prize winner, stood at the top of the steps holding a bouquet of red lilies—to be presented to the Prime Minister. Like Vanda she wore her hair in the ceremonial style, with the tress at the side of the face, and decorated with strings of threaded jasmine. We sat about for a time at the Residency—I have no idea why—and presently got back into the car and drove off to the State Guest House.

Here the reception committee waited at the top of the steps

in two large sex-segregated groups, the gentlemen on the wide terrace adjoining the porch, the ladies under the porch itself. There was an assortment of costumes, Shan, Burmese, Indian. Very sensibly the gentlemen kept back against the French windows, in the shelter of the balcony above. There was a great coming and going of cars and jeeps in the deluging rain. Some armed police boys took shelter under the trees at the bottom of the long curved drive that sweeps up to the house.

With Mrs. Aldworth and Vanda and the girl carrying the red lilies I took up a position at the top of the steps, just out of reach of the rain. We seemed to wait for a long time. Then at last the Prime Minister's car arrived and a lady wearing a fur coat over her *longyi* got out, with a little girl at her side, and Vanda came forward and presented the bouquet, which I was relieved to see was still holding together; then U Nu himself stepped out looking exactly like all the pictures of him, and the other girl presented the sheaf of red lilies. U Nu went straight up the steps and joined the gentlemen. Then the local ladies and the European in their midst were presented to the Prime Minister's wife, and we adjourned with her into the room immediately inside the porch. U Nu in the meantime had already adjourned with the male members of the reception committee to the room beyond. And there we all sat in our sex-segregation for about fifteen minutes, the Prime Minister's wife with the bouquet across her lap and her little girl at her side, and the ladies at each side of her making conversation with her; once she looked in my direction and obviously inquired who I was.

In the room beyond, the round pleasant face of the Prime Minister, surmounted by the turban with the crisp bow at the side, was visible. Someone handed him a sheaf of papers. The rooms were dark from the rain storm, and it was a little time before an orderly hurrying to and fro got the electric light turned on. After about fifteen or twenty minutes the Prime Minister got to his feet and the party broke up. U Nu and his family went up the stairs, and cars began to move up in the pouring rain to the bottom of the steps.

But by then the rain had turned to hailstones. They were of an astonishing size, and both men and women ran out on to the terrace to pick them up, putting them into their mouths as

though they were sweets, and pressing them to their eyes—hailstones, I was assured, were very good for the eyes. Servants came running with tumblers to collect these little balls of ice.

When the storm abated the sky across the garden was burnished gold, against which the jacarandas stood out hyacinth-blue, part of the sky's wild splendour.

At the bottom of the drive the police boys were excitedly gathering up the hailstones, and the water was running in rivulets by the grass verges of the road.

With the Inle Lake trip accomplished, and with transport so difficult, there seemed no point in lingering in Taunggyi, and I called again on the Resident to discuss means of getting to Kalaw. He telephoned Sao Tun E, the Home Minister, who was now back, and a jeep was promptly dispatched to take me to him at his pleasant English-style residence high up on the wooded hill.

This Minister of royal house I found possessed of a quiet charm and graciousness. With great courtesy he told me that I could not have wished to journey to Kalaw at a more convenient time, for U Tun Lu, the Assistant Resident, was coming to Taunggyi that very afternoon, and I could go back with him in the evening. The jeep which had brought me was at my disposal; I could send it back from Kalaw.

I used the jeep in the afternoon to visit the colossal hilltop Buddha, and when I got back my host inquired if it was too early to suggest a drink 'for the road'. We agreed that as it was the last drink we could be having together—anyhow in Taunggyi—the sundown point might be stretched. Whilst the point was still being stretched U Tun Lu arrived with his son Richard and Sao Win Kyi, the Sawbwa of Pindaya.

We set off in convoy, with the Sawbwa's car leading, then myself alone in the jeep, and U Tun Lu and his son in the rear. We headed straight into the tremendous sunset. I do not know whether it was in fact an exceptionally beautiful sunset, or whether it owed something of its radiance to my late host's hospitality. . . .

The road zigzags down for some eight hundred feet to Kalaw. At some cross-roads, at dusk, the Sawbwa's car left us, and shortly after we were entering the hill-encircled little town

of Kalaw. In the fading light a white pagoda surrounded by satellite pagodas was visible in the middle of the town. Along a wide street of shops we ran out of the town and into a broad shallow valley and turned up past a police-barracks into a pine-covered hilliness, at the top of which was a charming English-style bungalow in a terraced garden. It was one more journey's end, for "I can put you up," U Tun Lu had said.

In the morning I set out with U Tun Lu's son, Richard, and another young man, his friend, who was also staying in the house—they were both medical students—and a jeep load of armed police, for Pindaya, famous for its caves. It seemed a long time since I had travelled with an armed escort—there had, in fact, been none since the journey to Pegu.

The day became surprisingly hot very quickly and the front of the jeep became an oven. We travelled across paddy fields and potato fields, and the earth was as red as the Indian plain. We came to the village of Pwèhla, huddled among green trees, shady and peaceful and curiously 'English'. There was no sign of life in its sleepiness, only the crowing of a cock in the near distance emphasizing a kind of summer somnolence. But, it seemed, all was not as idyllic as would appear, for the people grew potatoes and cabbages which they sent to Rangoon, and what they produced was in excess of demand. There was a plan afoot to induce them to grow groundnuts as a more profitable crop.

We were on our way to the Haw, the palace of the Sawbwa of Pindaya, where we were to lunch. Pindaya huddles beside its lake at the foot of thickly wooded hills, over which march hundreds of small white pagodas, culminating in a shrine half way up the foremost hill, which holds the famous caves. There were women bathing and washing clothes under a big old banyan tree overhanging the lake, their voices and laughter carrying across the water.

The Haw is a little out from the lake. It is small but built in the ornate style of the old Mandalay palace, with a multiplicity of roofs and upturned gables. It has an appearance of age, but was in fact built by the present Sawbwa's father. It is approached through a shady garden above the road, with jasmine-covered pergolas and tall trees. Brilliant coloured

flowering creepers cascade down over the brick wall—a dull red, again in the Mandalay manner—to the deep dust of the road. Opening out from a great bare hall of a room on the first floor there is a square verandah with windows set between thick pillars of glass mosaic, and in the middle, under a gabled turret, an ornate shrine with a gold Buddha image. One of the windows opens on to a white foreground pagoda, with a park-like vista of pines flowing away to the head of the lake. The occasional group of tall palms look oddly out of place in this landscape of pines and firs.

In the big room on the first floor we rested awhile after the heat and dust of our journey, the Sawbwa and his sister sitting with us. Blue-covered chairs were ranged round the walls and blue curtains flew out from doorless doorways. And as though to complete the colour-scheme a pair of swallows flew in and out with a blue flash of wings through the open windows. The room was rendered palatial by its very bareness, as though furnished by its own loftiness and by the strong bright sunlight. It had dignity, which clutter never has. And this Shan prince and princess were two of the most dignified human beings I have ever had the pleasure and privilege of meeting—slender, graceful in their movements, gracious in their manner, but grave, a little withdrawn, with that *je ne sais quoi* of people in whose blood there is generations of authority.

The princess accompanied us to the caves, squeezing in with us in the jeep. A rough road winds up the hillside to the foot of the long steep covered way to the shrine at the entrance to the caves. Here we left the jeep and our footwear and went on up the high brick-built steps up to the platform in front of the shrine. Immediately inside the huge arch of the entrance to the caves, to the left of the shrine, there is another shrine, smaller but very ornate, and littered with a profusion of faded artificial flowers, hanks of human hair, dusty paper fans and roses, silk umbrellas—dusty offerings of every kind, and on the ground all round the scattered wrappings and packings from candles and joss-sticks—the usual litter left in the wake of ritualistic worship.

As whoever was supposed to act as our guide through the labyrinth behind the shrine was not to be found a workman who had been sitting on the ground with another man having

a meal undertook to do so. He went away and came back with bamboo torches—hollow bamboo stuffed with rags soaked in kerosene. Richard's friend elected not to come on the tour of the caves. He said frankly that he disliked them, in which he had my sympathy, for I myself dislike caves—a dislike into which a mild claustrophobia enters, combined with the irrational fear that the guide will lose his way. But the young man was not collecting material for a book, and I was, so I resolutely turned my back on the sunshine and faced into the gloom.

These Pindaya caves are immensely high. At times even holding the flaring torches at arm's length above the head it was impossible to make out the tops of the vast caverns. There are Buddha images everywhere. On dusty ledges and in niches high and low, carved out of the rock face, and hundreds of them in mass formation in caves below caves, so that one peers down on to them, ghostly figures momentarily revealed in the wavering light of the torches—hundreds of Buddha images, above, below and all around, half lost in the shadows and covered with the dust of ages. How did they all get there? My companions could not tell me. They had always been there. Yes, but who put the first there, and why? Maurice Collis suggests¹ that 'there must have been for centuries a guild of sculptors at Pindaya, who sold their work to the pilgrims'.

The bulk of the images are near the entrance; as you penetrate deeper they loom only occasionally from niche or shelf, and the great caverns seem the lonelier for not being peopled with these stone figures. In places water drips from the roof somewhere up in the heart of the hill, and the stones underfoot are slippery with slime. At one point the water gathers in a pool known as the 'fairy well', though it suggests evil spirits rather than fairies. There is a cave down through a hole where alchemy is said to have been practised, and a platform at the top of some rough-hewn stone steps where weaving was done—though why anyone should wish to weave in a dark cave by torchlight was not explained. At the end of a long grim passage there is a small hole leading on through the hillside and which is, according to the legend, the old road to Pagan—three hundred miles to the west. At one point our guide lit a candle

¹ In *Lords of the Sunset* (Faber & Faber), 1938.

—whether he had brought it with him or found it there on the boulder beside the track I have no idea, but when we turned a corner I looked back at that small flame in the horrible darkness and thought that I had never seen a more forlorn symbol of loneliness. Surrounded by the blackness and silence and loneliness it would sit there with not even a bat for company until it expired in the darkness. I felt a kind of pity for the small thin lonely flame, the only living thing in that dreadful hollow deadness.

It was a relief to emerge again into the hot bright sunlight and lean on the rail of the pagoda platform and look out over the park-like wooded plateau. On the way down we met an old man wearing the baggy Shan trousers and high-pointed hat. He wore the hat balanced on top of a towel turban, and he carried a stick with an iron prong, his eyes searching the grasses and shrubs and weeds at the sides of the steps as he mounted to the platform. He was looking, said the princess, for medicinal herbs growing on the upper part of the hill, sanctified, and therefore made more efficacious, by their proximity to the shrine.

Back at the palace we found the table laid for a meal in the big room where the blue curtains blew out from the doorways and the open windows framed the sun-hazy distances. Our host and hostess had eaten before we arrived, but the Sawbwa wandered in and out, and his sister sat with us. Afterwards we all sat again on the blue chairs and drank plain tea; the men smoked cheroots and I wandered away with the princess and took some photographs.

"How do you pass the time here?" I asked her.

She told me, "I read and knit—and we play chess."

I had a sudden vision of them isolated there under their turrets, a fairytale prince and princess in an enchanted tower, cut off from the world. Actually there are many more than the two of them living there—other members of the family. For one thing the Sawbwa is married, though we did not meet the Mahadevi, who is the daughter of a deposed Sawbwa.

Sawbwa is the Burmese corruption of the Shan *Sao Hpa*, meaning Heavenly Lords of Shan. Formerly the princes who ruled the Shan States called themselves *Ne-Twet-Bayin*, meaning the Sunrise Lords. Now their sun sets; such power as they

wield is only moral, and the Resident is set in authority over them. They no longer live in princely splendour and are being steadily absorbed into the new administration. Maurice Collis writing of them in 1938 as 'Lords of the Sunset', in his book of that title—this being the name applied them by the Burmese kings—was unwittingly prophetic. They had to pass with the changing times, as the princes of India had to pass; but though they have been voted out of power they cannot, it seems, be altogether voted out of the affections of the people—at least of those of the older generation. The Sawbwa was personal and real to them; the central Government is remote as Rangoon itself. But the sun is setting now for the princes, as it long ago set for the kings, and it rises upon a new order.

I had been recommended by Maurice Collis that when in Kalaw I should call upon an old friend of his, Noël Whiting, who was, he said, 'a great authority on the country'. I had already encountered him in the pages of two of Maurice Collis's books and was interested to meet him in person.

I found him in a delightful stone cottage perched on a crag above a wooded valley crossed by a stream. Beyond the valley the great hills folded into each other till the farthest seemed to melt into the sky. Because in Rangoon I had heard Noël Whiting described as a 'recluse' I had expected to meet someone difficult, aloof and perhaps eccentric. I found a tall, grey-haired man of distinguished appearance and pleasant easy manner, who received me very cordially, and it was exciting to be in a house so full of books—from floor to ceiling—and flowers and beautiful things. The house was as full of books and beautiful things when the Japanese arrived on the scene in 1942, but even whilst he was still living there they came in and helped themselves, and protests to the series of commanding officers did not prevent it, though such protests were sometimes sympathetically received.

Eventually they helped themselves to the owner of the house as well. For ten days they shut him up in a garage, then transferred him to the local lock-up for six months, the first two of which he was kept with nothing to do and nothing to read—he was surprised, he said, when he learned that that period was only two months—"it seemed much longer." He spent another

six months as servant to the Japanese Chief of Police in Kalaw, then he was sent to Lower Burma, to a prison camp in Tavoy, where they set him to work chopping wood. This camp, he said, was "quite horrible", and I did not care to ask for details. When he got back in 1945 the little house was still there, but it had been completely ransacked. A few things which he had given to friends to hide for him were saved and eventually restored.

I found him singularly unembittered by his experiences. The Japanese, who had been initially received as liberators, were eventually hated and resented. For one thing their face-slapping technique was intolerable. From liberators they became 'Fascist Dacoits', as U Nu records in his book, *Burma Under the Japanese*. But they were not all offensive in their role of occupiers, and to be able to concede that, when you have had your possessions—including art treasures collected over years—looted and your whole library burnt, and been yourself in solitary confinement and known the horror of the prison camps, indicates a rare spirit of detachment.

With Noël Whiting I called upon a Burmese lady, the widow of an Irishman of title, who had shown great courage during the occupation. Her wooden house, with its wall hangings, books, and tiger skin rugs on the polished floor, was one of the most delightful Burmese houses I was in. I met there her daughter, who had escaped into India when the Japanese came in. I asked her how she had got there, and she answered, simply, "I walked."

She had been in the epic exodus through the Hukawng Valley. It had taken her, she told me, about three weeks to do the three hundred miles. Up to two hundred thousand people—English, Anglo-Burmans, Indians—are said to have started on that desperate trek, but less than twenty thousand got through—that is to say one in ten.

Kalaw seemed to me the most beautiful place I had seen in all my travels throughout the Union, and it was pleasant walking and talking with Noël Whiting, but having visited Pindaya, and met the Sawbwa, there was no more I could usefully do there, and it seemed time to descend from the cool plateau and return once again to the sweltering plain.

LOTUS AND RAINBOW

ALTHOUGH I did not stay to see in Rangoon that aspect of culture represented by the dancing, pageantry and tableaux of the *Thingyan*, the water-festival, I did see, earlier on, a very fine expression of the national culture in the shape of an exhibition of dancing given in Rangoon by the students of the Mandalay School of Fine Arts. The students are children whose ages range from eight to the early teens. They come from all parts of the country and all types of homes. They are dedicated children in that when they have been accepted for training at the school—and they are not accepted unless it is initially clear that they have a natural talent—devotion to the fine arts becomes their vocation. This is not to say that their conventional education is neglected; rightly it is felt that these young artists and potential artists must be broadly educated, for they must understand the ideas and emotions they interpret through their art—on the principle that without knowledge there can be no interpretation.

I was, quite simply, charmed with them. They were lovely children; lovely young people. Watching them I remembered the children, little children and older children—children who were really young people—acting in plays of their own invention at A. S. Neill's school. There was the same vividness and vitality, the sense of huge enjoyment, and utter unself-consciousness. And all as brimfull of personality as the dancers of the great days of the Diaghiliev ballet. These children, too, brought personalities of a vivid order to bear on a finely perfected technique, so that all they did was exciting and moving. It was all so very much more than a display of technical skill; it was the demonstration of a living art.

The children dance to the traditional music of drums,

flutes, brass, and such is their physical grace and personal charm that they make of simple exercises in rhythm, done to the accompaniment of only a drum, a feat of the utmost beauty, quite one of the most delightful items in the whole repertoire. Continuing from these basic exercises the program develops Burmese dancing through its various phases—which includes the Siamese influence—to the present day. The latter is at once livelier and less conventionally ordered—and much less graceful. As at the *pwés*, clowns play their part with ribald jokes and burlesque both during and between the song-and-dance numbers. The clowning affords scope for their acting ability, which is of a remarkably high order, and for the expression of their very individual personalities, for clowning demands a very special quality of communication between actor and audience. So huge was their enjoyment of what they did that sometimes their own laughter broke through the acting.

And so infectious was their sense of hilarious fun that they carried the big adult audience with them every inch of the way, in laughter as uproarious as it was sustained. They played for a week in Rangoon to packed houses. I went twice, and each time a standing-room-only audience gave them a rapturous reception—and Burmese audiences, though they laugh readily, are normally not much given to applause. Their advent was something bright and fresh and shining and *apart*, in that raucous city of the cinema loud-speaker. The success of the visit of the young dancers of the Mandalay School of Fine Arts to Rangoon indicates a lively interest on the part of the general public in the traditional culture, but more than one such enterprise will be needed to maintain that interest as a living force. A great deal could be done, and perhaps will in time be done, through the Burmese film industry. A start has been made with the filming of the Prime Minister's play, *The People Win Through*, though this is not concerned with any manifestation of the people's culture but with political ideas, and is more anti-communist propaganda than art. At present Burmese films tend to be 'glamorous' musicals, with the music—judging by the recordings loud-speakered through the streets by way of advertisement—either Indianized or Westernized. If the singing and dancing of the students of the Mandalay

Fine Arts School could be filmed and distributed throughout the country, taken in mobile units to the villages, it would be an important and valuable first step in the right direction. Though the towns have greater need of it than the villages, who have not yet fallen under the generally corrupting influence—morally and culturally—of Western films.

The Constitution makes public health a first care of the State, and a good start has been made with medical and dental inspections at every school, State and private, and well-equipped mobile units visiting outlying schools and hutments; but at the time of writing (summer, 1954) there are only twelve hundred trained doctors to care for eighteen million people, and only seventeen dentists—dentistry does not attract students as readily as medicine in spite of scholarships being available.

The Government is expanding training facilities and has established a Health Institute for the production of vaccines and for research work. In an address to the Army Officers at their Fourth Annual Conference in the summer of 1953 the Prime Minister declared that it was the country's need and the Government's aim to produce a thousand qualified doctors a year. But even with the opening of new Medical Colleges it seems only possible, at present, anyhow, to produce five or six hundred a year, and in the meantime, when only some fourteen or fifteen doctors are being turned out in a year, the country must be largely dependent on foreign doctors. It is confidently believed, however, that in about five years' time there will be sufficient Burmese doctors for both civil and military purposes. No less than eight hundred Health Centres are being set up throughout the country, and the School of Health Assistants is hoping to train one hundred and twenty workers a year to man them. These centres will supply 'midwives, public health nurses, lady health visitors, vaccinators, rural health inspectors and health educators'. When there are sufficient doctors available the Health Service will function as an auxiliary service, 'leaving the Medical Service free to concentrate on its own special sphere'.

The Government has announced plans for compulsory national service, for both men and women, divided into

age-groups; it is expected that the plans will take about two years to complete. The plans are to be thorough, to avoid both evasions and wastages, and will include the conscripting of 'reasonable numbers of selected doctors, engineers, etc., for the armed forces and other priority programmes'. It is added that 'compulsion may perhaps be softened a little by compensatory factors such as reasonable remuneration and other amenities'.

A big drive is also being made to get girls trained as nurses. Before the war nurses were Anglo-Indians, Anglo-Burmans, and Karens, and nursing was at about the same level socially as domestic service was in England. It is only since independence that Burmese girls have begun to emerge from home and into professions, and thanks to Daw Khin Kyi (the widow of the murdered Aung San), Chairman of the Social Services Council, nursing has become a respected profession, and training courses are now open to girls of middle school education. After three years' training they may take post-graduate courses and specialize. The Government is hoping to turn out about two hundred trained nurses a year.

There is also a great shortage of teachers, both primary and secondary. Special intensive training courses for teachers have been organized by the Government to speed up the supply for the primary schools and have proved very successful. There are now six of these two months' courses every year and it is hoped to produce six thousand primary school teachers a year in this way.

Pyidawtha is a word commonly heard and seen in print in present-day Burma. It means more than Welfare State. It means, really, Ideal State. The Prime Minister, in his 1953 address to the Army Officers, declared that *Pyidawtha* was more than 'the clearing up of the mess caused by war and insurrection, repairing of swampy roads, building bridges, railways and houses, producing more rice, timber, oil and minerals'. A country could not be called *Pyidawtha* unless it abolished 'the evil system of class exploitation, of crimes, of disease, of retrogression, of ignoramuses. . . .' *Pyidawtha*, the Prime Minister made it clear, is much more than material

achievement. Material achievements alone would be 'like a glittering golden monastery without anything inside'.

Mass Education, in developing community spirit and the sense of civic responsibility, makes a valuable contribution to *Pyidawtha*. Its material contribution is the establishing of five thousand monastic schools to meet the educational need in areas where there are—as yet—no State Primary Schools, and where such schools as exist are short of teachers and accommodation. It was calculated that on a basis of forty pupils to a school some two hundred thousand pupils could be catered for by this scheme. Through the press and radio U Than Aung sought the co-operation of monks and village elders throughout the Union for the scheme.

In 1952 the Mass Education Council drew up a Five Year Plan. It began its activities in sixteen districts, had twenty-four by 1954, and plans to have thirty by 1957, with seventeen hundred organizers as against the six hundred and sixty-five of 1954. The five thousand monastic schools of the original 1952-53 plan are to become eight thousand, catering for three hundred and twenty thousand children, and Summer Vacation Social Service Camps, with adult education classes, are to be established in thirty districts, catering for five hundred thousand people.

Of equal importance is the rehabilitation scheme for young men who grew up with guns in their hands as guerillas in the resistance movement during the Japanese occupation, many of whom became insurgents of various political denominations when the present government was formed.

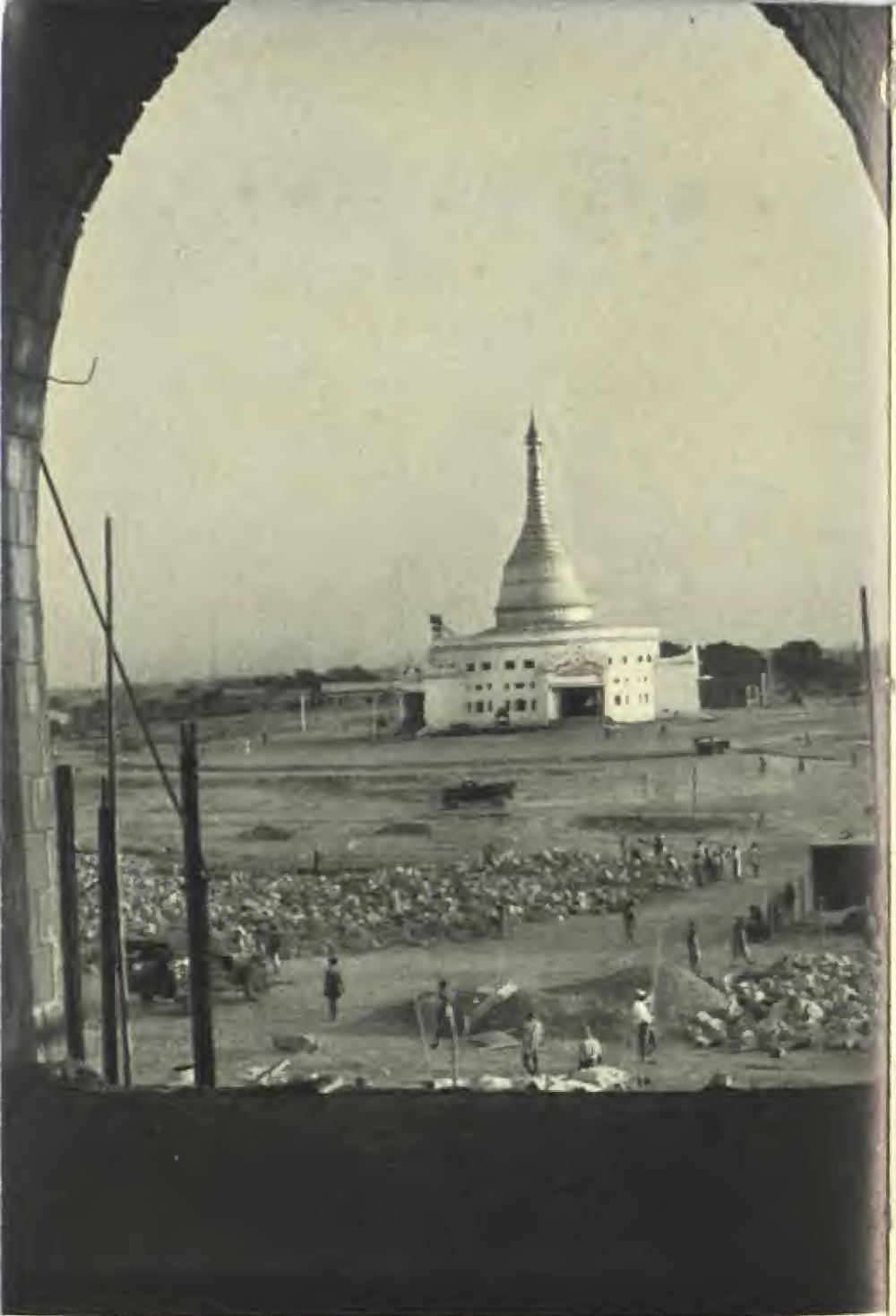
This is a really imaginative scheme. Normally the party or coalition of parties in power round up their active opponents and shut them up in prisons or camps. The government of the Union of Burma set out to coax them into the fold and re-educate them, and it has to an astonishing extent succeeded. To the Ministry of Public Works it added the Ministry of Rehabilitation, with a Board for the formation and running of a Rehabilitation Brigade. Today there are Rehabilitation Centres at Prome, Meiktila and Moulmein, in addition to Aung San Myo—"Aungsan Town," the big centre fourteen miles out from Rangoon.



Boy and girl dancers of the Mandalay School of Fine Arts

(Photos by courtesy of the Guardian, Rangoon)





The World Peace Pagoda, the Kaba Aye, near Rangoon (from the Assembly 'Cave')

The scheme was initiated by General Aung San as early as 1946, with the idea of finding employment for ex-servicemen and unemployed youths, who were to be organized in a brigade for the rehabilitation of the war-ravaged countryside. When Aung San was assassinated in July 1947 various of his colleagues continued with the scheme, though it developed upon somewhat different lines with the flare-up of insurgent troubles. The scheme was extended to include surrendered insurgents and unemployed refugees. The first battalion of the Rehabilitation Brigade, consisting of over nine hundred officers and men, was formed in May 1950, with headquarters at the model town founded for the purpose and named Aung San Myo, in memory of the martyred General. Seven more battalions were formed by the end of 1951, bringing the number of officers and men up to over four thousand.

The men wear a semi-military uniform and the Brigade is semi-military in organization, though it is purely voluntary. It is hoped that all who join will remain for two years, so that they may thoroughly learn a trade which will equip them to earn a living outside, but they are free to leave if they weary of the life, and a few do. The men are paid eighty *kyats* a month—about £6—and get free accommodation, uniform, and equipment, but they must buy their own food. At the end of the two years the plan is to get them redistributed to towns and villages to make room for newcomers, 'to keep up the supply of new blood'; there is recruitment all the time, and the small percentage of failures makes room for the newcomers.

There are neat brick-built bungalows for the married members of the Brigade, and rows of double-storeyed barracks for the unmarried. It is planned to build a modern school for the children, and to develop training in Cottage Industries for the women. The men are taught the basic building trades—bricklaying, carpentry, etc.—and as the scheme develops it is hoped to train about four thousand members of the Brigade every year in technical and vocational subjects. Trained and semi-trained squads are sent out on constructional work under skilled supervision, and during the past two years have worked on the construction of air-strips, reservoirs, roads, etc. Qualified engineers are loaned as instructors from the Public Works Department. It is hoped to train some of the more

intelligent members of the Brigade as sanitary inspectors and health assistants to look after the health and hygiene of the community.

The Rehabilitation Board is convinced that the artisan training centre at Aung San Myo in particular 'will eventually become "A University for Workers" where a regular flow of disciplined, efficient and responsible technicians will be started and maintained to meet the exacting demands of growing industries and projects in Burma. It firmly believes also that this seat of learning for lower classes will solve major problems of unemployment, discontent, low productivity, and even the present lawlessness in the country.'

The Rehabilitation Board could be right. The scheme is quite as imaginative and exciting an expression of faith in human nature as the Mass Education scheme, with which it shares the honours of being a wise government's most valuable contribution to the achievement of *Pyidawtha*. In these two great schemes the rainbow may be said to have appeared on the Burmese horizon, after the storms of war and occupation and civil war. It is going to turn out fine again; finer than it ever was. It is not the dew which is on the lotus, but the rainbow.

When the evening of the farewell dinner party at Themis Court came and I tucked frangipani into my hair for the last time I felt both happy and sad—happy because this honour was being so gracefully paid to me, and sad because it was the end of a great adventure. Sometimes it had felt like an adventure in loneliness; at others an adventure in friendship; and always a search for the soul of a people.

I think I did glimpse something of that soul. I *feel* that I did, and in such matters the heart knows more surely than the mind. It was to be glimpsed not only in the rapt faces kneeling before the flowers and the candles at the pagodas everywhere, murmuring the eternal reminder of the transience, suffering and change that is life, but in the laughing faces at the *pués*—seas of laughing faces as rapt in laughter as in devotion. It was to be glimpsed sometimes in the grave beautiful face of a young monk, or in the face of an old one so heavily mapped by the years as to seem centuries old. It was in the serious face of a young bridegroom in the deep south,

in the eyes of a child in an off-the-road village, in the look of love in an old man's face as he contemplated the sunset glow on the red walls of old Mandalay.

It was in the songs Daw Aung Kyi sang at my farewell party in a voice soft and thin and sweet as pagoda bells. I do not know what songs she sang, to a thin plaintive music of strings and dulcimer, only that they were traditional, that they were old, and one I think was about love; I do not think that otherwise it could have been so sad. Yet the Burmese people are not at all a sad people; they have none of the deep Indian melancholy. They are an essentially gay people, who laugh easily, and love fêtes and festivals. Perhaps they are the only really happy people left in the world.

They have every reason for happiness. They have a most beautiful country which is rich in all that its peoples need, and in which there is room for all without crowding. They have a religion in which they profoundly believe, and one which offers them a philosophy that gives meaning to the otherwise meaningless chaos of life. They are not cursed like the West with possessiveness. I never found any Burmese home, rich or poor, cluttered with *things*. Nor people amassing wealth for its own sake, as in the West. They know that there is no virtue but only enslavement and illusion in possessions. So they give their wealth and their greatest treasures to the pagodas; and in the vicinity of the pagodas, which speak to them of the transience of life, they take their simple innocent pleasures, and part of their pleasure is to make little offerings of flowers and candles at the shrines of the Enlightened One, who turned his back upon all possessions and taught that in craving in all its forms lay all sorrow.

But all this is not new; all this was always an integral part of the Burmese soul. In Burma today there is new cause for happiness, because after many years of storm and stress the rainbow has touched the lotus. This does not mean that all is now set fair, that there can be no more storms, no more troubles and difficulties. The political climate of the whole world is unsettled and unsafe, but wise statesmanship and the avoidance of the Pakistan road may keep the land of the crested lion safe. With the pacification of the Karens, the evacuation of the last of the K.M.T's, and the surrender of the majority of the various

insurgents, the situation has vastly improved since 1952 when the Prime Minister declared that Burma was at the cross-roads. Small armed groups, such as were rounded up on the Thazi-Kalaw-Taunggyi road in the summer of 1954, will probably continue to harass the government from time to time but present no serious problem.

As to whether 'Red China' has designs on her small socialist neighbour—there is no indication that she has; the present relations between the two countries are amicable, and there have been to date no incidents along the eight-hundred-mile border. And when Chou En-Lai called on the Burmese Prime Minister on his way back from the Geneva Conference which settled the fate of Indo-China he declared that China would respect the territorial integrity of Burma, but U Nu did not walk into the Communist parlour when the Chinese Premier suggested the signing of a non-aggression pact.

Communism, whatever the model, is not for a devoutly Buddhist country. The whole orientation of the Buddhist way of life is opposed to the materialism of Marxism. "We have," says U Nu, "no other choice but Democracy."

There remains but to call down a blessing on the choice: May the Tree of Fulfilment, *Padaythabin*, flourish for them, and *Pyidawtha*, their common goal, be fully realized. There is good reason to believe that it will be. The rainbow has touched the lotus.

London-Connemara,
April-September, 1954.

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